

on spec

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Baumer

Paul Hosek

Adam La Rusic

Claire Litton

D.T. Mitenko

Jerome Stueart

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cover

“Emotional Wave” © Robert Pasternak

• Listen Up! •

Last fall at *PureSpeculation*, *On Spec* was approached by David Chapman, a Red Deer radio producer, who proposed a web-based radio series dramatizing short fiction. David asked to use stories from *On Spec* to launch it, and some of our authors have happily obliged. The web site **Rattenfanger Radio** has recently been launched for your listening (and reading) pleasure. Hear what great SF sounds like at **www.members.shaw.ca/ratten**.

Let us know what you think!

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How We Do It

Diane Walton, General Editor

We occasionally get asked how we go about selecting a story for publication. Writers send us their manuscripts, entrusting us with their care. For the longest time, these orphans seem to vanish into an abyss. One day, months later, a letter arrives in the mail with either the bad news or the contract. What happens in between?

We try to organize our reading schedule on a quarterly basis, hence our posted deadlines of the end of February, May, August and November. The mail gets picked up about once a week, and new manuscripts are first entered into our database at the office. They pretty much have to get past me next. I read every story we receive, and judge whether or not it gets to the next level. What turns me on is originality. New treatments of old themes, with fresh, vibrant characters who seem to jump off the page. And emotion. I want to laugh out loud, and shed the occasional tear. What turns me off may be hackneyed plots, "mainstream" plots with a few SF trappings to try and get it through the door, flat, unengaging characters, dull openings, and endings that you can guess after page three. And spelling. Mustn't forget the spelling.

And cover letters. Did I mention the cover letters? I wince with pain when I read "I hope you enjoy reading this story as much as I did writing it". One editor I know keeps the most outrageous cover letters, and occasionally reads them when he participates on writing and editing panels at SF conventions. We have no hard and fast rule

concerning cover letters, except make them do the job they are meant to do. Present yourself (briefly) to the editors (no need to mention all of us by name), and present your story (equally as briefly). That's all. If a cover letter begins with "My story is about...", I put on my "objective and unbiased editor" hat, but usually fear the worst.

Let the STORY tell us what it is about. If it is old enough to leave home, it is certainly old enough to speak for itself.

OK, so maybe a story isn't going to make it past the first reading. It happens to about 60% of them. I distill my initial impressions of the story to a comment or two, draft the rejection letter, and return it to my assistant, Shellon. She gets to update the database, type the comments I have made and print the letter for mailing to the author. If there's a SASE with sufficient Canadian postage, we do the Dance of Joy. If there's a SASE with non-Canadian postage, we slap a Canadian stamp on top of the offending item, and hope that this less than subtle gesture is noticed at the other end. If there is NO SASE, we look for an e-mail address and send the reply by e-mail. If there's NO SASE and NO e-mail, we reluctantly write the letter and use one of our own envelopes, being careful to include a copy of our guidelines with the part about SASE's highlighted in some suitably garish colour.

Moving along... I read throughout the reading period, but wait until the end before I hand all the remaining manuscripts to Susan MacGregor, a fellow Edmonton editor. I'm fairly generous at this point. Many stories go to Susan, even if I know they haven't got a prayer. In fairness, there may have been some redeeming social value that I missed. Aside from that possibility, I like to have a second opinion to include with the rejection comments. Susan subjects them to much the same process, applying her particular set of likes and dislikes to them, as I have. And again, after her reading, the rejected stories get a letter, and the remaining 15% of the original pile get sent to a third editor. These days, it is either Steve or Peter, depending on who is less occupied with other pursuits at the time. (By the way, Barry Hammond handles all the poetry submissions by himself, brave fellow that he is.)

After Steve or Peter e-mails back the comments on the manuscripts they've read, we spend a couple of weeks coming to an agreement regarding which stories to reject and which to buy. This is done via e-mail, at least until some kind benefactor gifts us with a generous travel allowance so we can have face-to-face editorial meetings.

Sometimes we all agree easily, and other times, one editor may see something in a story that has completely befuddled the other two. Bottom line is that while we stand by our decisions on the stories to publish, our individual likes and dislikes probably range as widely as do those of our reading audience.

If you're following closely, we're at the point when contracts are prepared and mailed to the writers whose work we've selected. Selected manuscripts go through a rigorous copy edit, and I'm told that authors generally appreciate the final opportunity to turn a "pretty good" story into a "very good" story. There is always something that can be cut from a manuscript. (Except for this editorial because... well... I'm the boss.)

The remaining authors get a reject, and we hope, the encouragement that their work has been kept by us long enough to be critiqued by three people who share a love of the genre, and also share the sad experience of having their writing rejected at one time or another. I won't belabor the point, but rejection by *On Spec* isn't the End of Life As We Know It. Send the story to someone else, and take what we say with a grain of salt. Many grains of salt. It is meant to be constructive. Don't be bitter. And don't waste your time arguing our decision. That never works.

Finally, the stories we select get put into issues in a fairly unscientific method. We have a finite number of pages to fill, and since stories are rarely of identical subject matter or length, we have to look at what we have on hand, what the word counts are, how long we've held onto them, and what their genre or subject matter is. So we try our best to NOT put the two "suicidal were-gerbil" stories next to each other in the same issue.

That is pretty much it. Kindly excuse me while I go and read some more slush. •

This just in... Canadian SF Rules! As I write this, word has just gone out that the short list of Hugo Award finalists includes none other than *On Spec's* own Peter Watts! His novel, "Blindsight" has created quite a stir since its appearance last year. Try to Google it and you will see what I mean. Check out Peter and his works at www.rifters.com Voting for the Hugo will be done by the members of this year's Worldcon, to be held in Yokohama, Japan. Congratulations Peter!

I've never been Hindu, but
Ganesha's at the window again.

Stop Plate Tectonics

Robert Weston

i. A Knock at the Window

I've never been Hindu, but Ganesha's at the window again. His thick, yellow-pink finger thumps the glass. I do my best to ignore it. I concentrate on my monitor, flickering reproachfully with unaltered pages of *An Introduction to the Zetetics and the Method of Elenchos*. I have work to do. Sedentary, derivative work. It needs attending to. My tenure track hangs in the balance, suspended by the merest threads of spit. Mind you, my behaviour is hardly that of a man fighting for his professional life. I think of Priya more than I work on the text; I masturbate more than I work on the text. One thing leads to another, I find. Ganesha keeps thumping. "Up for a game?"

"No," I tell him. "I'm not."

"C'mon," he says, "I'm bored."

"You're omniscient."

He nods divinely. "Precisely why I'm bored."

I turn my chair away from the window. "I've too much work."

"Sure you do."

"It's true." I await another tap. Nothing's forthcoming. Ganesha's gone. Leaning to the window I see him below, galumphing across the courtyard to the place where Mooshika, faithful rat, sits at one of the chess tables, rapping his dull claws against the stone.

• • •

ii. Buchanan Hall, E-Wing, Room E379

In the golden years, studying the Classics meant something. We had our own department back then. I've seen the pictures. Bearded, extravagant men grinning like tennis pros, shoulder-to-shoulder in black-and-white hound's-tooth. Amalgamation made us *Classics, Near Eastern and Religious Studies*. That lasted two decades. The silver years. These days, we're more succinct. *Philosophy Dept.*, they call us. Simple and imprecise.

The office isn't hideous. The paint's only now beginning to shed its skin. The window overlooks Buchanan Courtyard. I can watch Ganesha and Mooshika mulling over knights and bishops, queens and pawns. Or backgammon. Or carrom. In general, Mooshika looks to be the better player, but I suspect Ganesha, big-hearted as he is with creatures smaller than himself, lets him win.

• • •

iii. Mysteries Are Everywhere

Pyrrho, the dazzling skeptic, is my favourite. He's best remembered for this motto: "Nothing can be known. Not even this." A joker!

Suspense was his bread and butter. Any question (example: Is Ganesha real?) can be resolved with a single answer. "Perhaps." Or as Pyrrho might say, in stronger terms: "Who The Fuck Knows?" His disciples dubbed themselves *zetetics*, after the Greek word for investigator. Twenty-four-seven, cradle-to-grave, that's what they did. Examine. Deduce. But never solve. Solutions are myths, so claimed the zetetics. When something appeared to become clear, it was hotly discarded as unknowable. Inscrutable. Mysterious. Et cetera.

Which is why a zetetic detective agency is such an inspired career move. No matter what happens, you're always on the case.

• • •

iv. My Fondest Memory of Katie

Foreheads first, we lean against the glass. We hold hands. The glass is warmer than I would've expected. Otters, sea lions, belugas, whatever

else they keep in these jar-bottom tanks slide by us, blue and green and back and forth. Her favourites are the belugas. When one of them waves at us, rumpling its fatty brow, she squeezes my thumb.

"Hello!"

Katie slaps my hip. "They can't hear you. You have to *wave back*." So I wave. She says, "They look like they're smiling. How come?"

"When your head's all dumpy like that," I explain, "it pays to have a sense of humour."

Katie holds her breath. She considers my explanation with the utter solemnity of youth. "If you kept me inside a tank like that, I wouldn't smile so much."

• • •

v. Proper Signage

In a slow, precise, user-friendly hand I write:

PETER HARMEN, ZETETIC DETECTIVE

Over my shoulder, Ganesha reads it aloud. "Not bad," he says, "It almost rhymes." I ignore him and step into the hallway. A thumbtack pins the sign to the cork board on my door, just to the left of my office hours. A commendable morning's work. Then, out of nowhere, I'm ambushed by a meagre twinge, a little flicker at the top of my spine. A warning of things to come.

• • •

vi. Figure-Eight

It was months ago when I first saw the sign posted in the Arts Lounge. Volunteers were needed for a study examining novel treatments for migraine headaches and depression. They were desperately interested in subjects whose headaches were so severe they were concurrent with visual and/or auditory hallucinations. I immodestly dubbed myself their ideal test case.

Dr. Leslie is the head researcher. The study ended months ago, but he's agreed to continue treating me. I visit him like a crooked old man from a nursery rhyme. Every step ignites a new flame or sets off

a terrifying depth charge. This is one of the obvious drawbacks to never leaving campus—all the headaches. Or so it seems; in any case, I never had them, not like this, before I started living here full-time.

When I arrive, Dr. Leslie knows better than to talk to me. He eases me into a stiff vinyl recliner, something evidently purloined from a dentist. “Try to relax,” he whispers. I try. I smile with the corners of my mouth and set off a blindingly impressive display. Dr. Leslie smiles back at me with a far less halting, stiff-lipped affair. The glint of his teeth is murderously bright. I am thankful when he closes his mouth and reaches for the electromagnet. It’s a plastic figure-eight on the end of a steel stick. A benign branding iron, if such things exist. Wires trail from its base, coil away and vanish inside a medicinal-looking device, raving with knobs and gauges. Dr. Leslie presses buttons, turns dials, toggles switches (et cetera) and the figure eight goes *click-click-click-click*. Holding the thing by its steel grip, Dr. Leslie slides it over my scalp like a feckless comb. Steadily, he turns a dial. The clicking rises in pitch; and the speed with which the pain fades and the fireworks subside is astonishing. Disturbing. Exquisite.

• • •

vii. Darwin Fish

There was a time when Priya and I fought over whether or not I was having an affair with a graduate student named Olivia Cheung. (I wasn’t.) The idea always struck me as absurdly farfetched. How Priya could imagine Olivia was interested in a sedentary, emotional cripple like me will always be a mystery. I suppose I should have taken it as a compliment, a marker of how highly she prized our marriage. Conversely, I wasn’t always such an emotional cripple.

For the past eighteen months, Olivia has been in Coventry, helping with the slow excavation of the Lunt Roman Fort, discovered there years and years ago. Now she’s back for a visit.

“Hi!” she says. “Wow! How *are* you?” For someone involved in the more stultifying aspects of archeology, her voice is remarkably akin to the snapping of bubble gum. She frowns, however, like Euripides. “I spoke to Kathryn. She told me about your wife. How’re you doing? Taking it easy?”

“I’m fine, coping.” I’d like to hug her. I can’t remember the last

time I touched somebody. Under different circumstances I very well might have. But I don't. Largely because a few paces behind Olivia is a pallid young man with what appear to be two black eyes.

Olivia sees me ogling. "I'm sorry," she says, stepping backward, clearing a path. "This is my brother, Kevin. I'm visiting him. Two weeks."

Kevin steps forward. He has a handshake like wet newsprint.

Olivia beams. "Kevin's doing amazing doctoral work. Probably not your scene though. Hard sciences."

I judge Kevin in an instant. I'm good at that. The sunken eyes. The poor posture. The evident malaise. Pure mathematics, I surmise. Computer science, perhaps. There's no difference these days, is there? In any case, Olivia's hypothesis holds true. Nothing I'm interested in.

She digs through her purse. "Didn't think I'd been away so long, but you wouldn't believe it. I feel like I don't know *anybody* here anymore. Just you old profs."

I laugh at my own expense. "I guess we never leave!"

"Nope." Olivia produces a notepad, yellow and green and carved into the shape of a fish, one with four tiny legs. Embossed on every page, fishily-shaped, is a word. *DARWIN*, it says. She scribbles a phone number, tears off a blossoming amphibian and pushes it into my palm. "Let's have lunch."

• • •

viii. My First Case

With a little *fft*, a slip of paper slides under my door. It may be fishy, but it's certainly not fish-*shaped*. It's a simple page of note paper, folded once in half. It poses the question:

Have you seen my Myth of Sisyphus? - K

"K". Helplessly, inexorably, I think of Katie. When I open the door, however, there's no one there.

• • •

ix. A Trio of Statistics

There are approximately three hundred car crashes per year on the Sea-to-Sky Highway. For each three hundred, there are approximately five hundred deaths. Last year, shortly before midnight on New Year's Eve, my wife and daughter were numbers 498 and 499. 500, the guy who swerved, held out for twelve hours, until noon the next day, so in truth he's actually Number One. On the upside, since he was still breathing at midnight, you could say he helped bring down the average by some small, insignificant margin. Every little bit helps. Good for him.

• • •

x. A Logical Proof for the Existence of Ganesha

A well-known proof for the existence of Ganesha—or of any god, for that matter—is that of the uncaused effect (pet theory of Aristotle and then, with perhaps lesser historical novelty, Thomas Aquinas). The theory is predicated on the assumption that all things are traceable backward to an ultimate zero. The uncaused effect. Physicists simplistically dub it “The Big Bang.” *Meta*-physicists, however, claim there's no such thing as an honest-to-goodness uncaused effect. Or, in standard form:

- i. Everything has a cause.
- ii. No thing can cause itself.
- iii. Every effect can be traced back to an earlier cause.
- iv. No causal chain can be of infinite length.
- v. All causal chains begin with an effect for which there is no discernible cause.
- vi. Ganesha (or whoever) is the cause of all effects with no discernible cause.

Conclusion: Ganesha (or whoever) exists.

Any logician can tell you this argument is unsound. It (arguably) proves an unobservable cause *exists*, but then makes suicidal leaps it can't possibly survive. Important things this argument does not prove: **a.** an all-powerful, unknowable entity who, in willy-nilly fashion, causes things to happen; **b.** an all-powerful bearded man who acts similarly;

c. an all-powerful bearded lady who does the same; d. a pink, four-armed, potbellied elephant man gallivanting around on the hump of a mouse; e. is for et cetera.

• • •

xi. Number One on a List of Things to Avoid, If at All Possible

1. Identifying the bodies of loved ones.

I'll elucidate: The morgue is linked to the hospital—physically attached, with bricks and mortar no less. White-coated attendants greet you cordially at the entrance. It's easy to get the impression that medical hope remains within reach. (It does not.)

The process is simple. You are led down corridors. Attendants whisper. "This way." Or: "Just a bit further."

You are brought to double doors. They are made of heavy metal and ominously dented at gurney-height. Standing in front of them, you have the strongest of doubts. And it occurs to you: Why weren't you more doubtful earlier? If you doubted earlier perhaps, more vehemently perhaps, right from the moment the phone rang, then maybe you could have prevented this.

(No.)

The double doors open. You haven't touched them, but they open. They are pushed and propped by kind attendants. How could you let this happen? There's no time left. Concentrate! *Doubt!* So passing through the doors, that's what you do. You doubt everything. You doubt everything anyone has ever tried to convince you was true. Pyrrho would be so proud! Someone lifts a sheet, however, and confirms what everyone there already knows. Doubt will never suffice.

• • •

xii. Another Knock on My Door

Kathryn Songman (also-known-as "K"), practicing existentialist, is acting chair of the department. She peeks into my office uninvited, as always. "Did you get my note?"

I point to the place where I've taped it to my wall. "I'm on the case."

Kathryn purses her lips. Nearly a smile. "That what the sign is

about? You think you're a detective now?"

"Just a gag."

She steps into the office with fluctuating degrees of anxiety and smugness. "There's a rumour you're sleeping in your office."

I regard her sideways. "Pah!"

"That's what I thought. You've such a lovely home."

It's true. A bungalow on the North Shore. For one reason or another, I haven't been there in months.

"Peter," she says. She draws her lips between her teeth and her face collapses inward like a demolition. "We both know you've had a rough year. If you're in trouble..." She raises her eyebrows compassionately.

"Of course." I push some saliva over my gums. "Same goes for you. Stop and chat whenever."

Kathryn blinks. "So about my book. I think I may've lent it to you a while back. Last term perhaps? Or even before that. Haven't seen it in ages. I have a bunch of copies, so – well, here's the thing." She lowers her voice. "The one I'm missing? It's *signed*, believe it or not. Very rare."

"I'll keep an eye out."

"Yes, well." Kathryn looks out the window. Kathryn's hand is folded over the doorknob like a napkin. "I was thinking. It might be at your place. Maybe you could check over the weekend?"

I nod my head, vigorously, zealously, but I'm staring at my fists. They're crumpled primly in my lap. "Sure thing!"

• • •

xiii. Two Reuben Sandwiches

I convinced Olivia to have our lunch at the Grad Club. It's a very nice restaurant, I told her. All the honorary doctorates eat there.

The waiter is impatient. I've already ordered three tonic waters and a soup. Out on the patio, Ganesha and Mooshika are picking over homemade reubens and besting one another at pinochle. The waiter returns. "You sure you don't want anything else?"

I gesture haughtily at the chair opposite. "I'm still waiting."

The waiter's mouth prepares something pithy, but instead gnaws politely on its inner cheek. "Whatever."

My soup gets cold.



xiv. Sedentary. Derivative.

I once attended a multidisciplinary arts conference at the University of Victoria. One of the speakers was an anthropologist from Mumbai University. Unlike her colleagues, her fieldwork wasn't conducted within the lone, last pre-industrial society on Earth. Instead, Priya's research was conducted at the world's top universities. She treated them like villages, cloistered ecosystems with their own cultures, economies, social mores, et cetera.

Her work caused a gorgeous stir. She concluded that the prevailing cultural mores of any academic village were based on self-preservation via indolence. And I quote: "The 'village' is supported by the assurance that the majority of its 'citizens' produce an output that is either sedentary, derivative or both—all of which is ostensibly legitimized by a complex mythos of innovation."

Priya had me pegged years before I married her.



xv. My Second Case

From the end of the corridor, I can see something heaped on the floor outside my office. At first glance, it looks to be Mooshika. I've never met him formally. When the heap stirs, however, I see it's not Mooshika. It's Olivia. I give her a naval salute, and snap my heels. "Missed you at lunch."

"Yeah," she says. She's covered with rain, which explains why she looks so much like a soused rat. With so much dripping, it's difficult to tell she's been crying. "I wouldn't've come," she says, "but I don't know anybody anymore."

"Eh?"

"I used to have friends, but they're all gone. It wasn't like we had a huge graduating class. There's nobody left."

I don't remember Olivia being the weepy type, certainly not over some lost acquaintances. Her tears are about something else. Since I shower at the Sports Centre, there's a towel in my office; Olivia kindly ignores its stench and dabs herself.

"So what happened?"

"I don't know."

"Oh?"

"It's Kevin. I can't find him. He came to campus yesterday and that's all I know. He never came back. I called the police and they're doing something, I think. But they don't seem too worried."

Kevin is suddenly likeable. He's gone into hiding. We have something in common. "Has he done this before? Pulled an all-nighter?"

"I checked with his thesis advisor. Kevin never showed up at the lab."

"I thought Kevin studied math."

"Math? Why? He's in neurobiology."

"Oh." I hope for an air of Columbo-like misdirection, though I have no idea what to say next. "So, maybe..."

Olivia isn't listening. "Before I moved away we hardly spoke. Now I've been on the other side of the world for a year and it's like visiting a stranger." She punctuates the admission with unexpected limpness. She folds herself into my chest. Her body is cold and damp.

"Tell me what can I do?" I do my best to sound capable. Paternal. Et cetera. Her expression tells me I'm doing a poor job of all three. She points to the sign on my door. "What's it mean?"

"Just a joke."

She puffs up a grim chuckle. "I thought maybe I'd hire you."

"I'll take it down."

"You don't have to. It's funny. Sorry I missed lunch."

"You had good reason." I push some wet hair from her face.

At this point, she eases away politely. "I think Kevin was depressed. That's why I'm so worried."

"He didn't leave a—I don't know."

"A note?" She laughs. "Who knows. His apartment's a mess, so." She gets up, steadies herself. "Anyway, I just wanted to tell somebody. I should go, in case he comes back."

"I'm sure he will. Shall I call you a cab?"

"I have his car."

"And you're okay to drive?" As soon as I say them I want the words back. What'll I do if she hands me a set of car keys? She has no idea I haven't left campus since January.

"I'm fine," she says, "I'll let you know as soon as I find him."

• • •

xvi. The Search Continues

Kathryn has called me into her office. It's clean. Surfaces are polished. Books are arranged alphabetically. On the wall is a framed image of young Camus, dandied up in *pied-noir* regalia, up to his ears in pea coat, cigarette flaccid in his mouth...

"So. You checked over the weekend?" Kathryn counter-crosses her legs.

"What?"

"My book. My signed copy. Please, tell me you found it at your place."

I shrug. "Sorry, I looked through everything."

"So you were home then? Over the weekend?"

I make myself incredulous. "I'm telling you, Kathryn, I don't have it."

Kathryn looks out the window. Ganesha's out there, down in the courtyard, Mooshika whipping his ass at mancala.

"I like to think," I say, "that when something goes missing, it's for good reason."

Kathryn looks at me. "It was my mother's. I know it's a weird thing, Peter, I know. Between mother and daughter. But that book's got a lot of sentimental value."

"You watch. I bet it turns up."

• • •

xvii. A Populist Proof for the Existence of Ganesha

900 million Hindus can't be wrong!

• • •

xviii. Elastic Wave Propagation (whatever that means)

I always arrive at the Kinsman Lab with a Mandarin junk-ship full of fireworks in my head. The display distracts me from the sixties-minimalist architecture. The building looks like a planner's after-thought, improved only by a pall of cedars.

Dr. Leslie isn't at his desk. The treatment room looks empty as well. A book on his desk boasts the portentous title, *Elastic Wave Propagation* (whatever that means). There are more titles I don't understand. Incongruously, there are a number of geological texts,

glossy covers with spewing volcanoes and pictures of the Earth from space, cleaved open to a drawing of the mantle crust. This reminds me of my skull and I have to sit down. The only available seat is behind the desk. It's an obsequiously comfortable chair. The desk is covered with papers and more words puncture my eyes. I'm about to avert my gaze to the calm off-white ceiling, when the title on one of the pages catches my eye. *Thesis Proposal: Seismic Interference by Kevin Cheung.*

"Peter?" Dr. Leslie is standing in the threshold.

I gurgle a greeting.

"You're back already?" There's pity in his eyes. "This is a tough month for you."

"Uh huh."

He lifts me out of my chair, floats me into the treatment room. Et cetera. Fifteen minutes later, it's as if I'm reborn; I'm a serial miracle baby.

Back in his office, I gesture at his desk. "Kevin Cheung. He's one of your students?"

"You know him?"

"I used to teach his sister, Olivia."

Dr. Leslie pushes past me and takes his seat, the one I'd been lolling in earlier. "Yes. I hear he's gone missing? Do you know what happened?"

"I don't know anything. Olivia's pretty upset."

"I'm worried myself." He taps his chin with a steeple of fingers. "But Kevin's a very good student, I'm sure he'll turn up. His thesis work is pretty wild stuff." The steeple collapses, and his fingers glide up his face to massage the bridge of his nose. "You know, I should have known. He's been neglecting things lately, hasn't given me a progress report in weeks. And depression's what I do, it's my job. I know all the signs and Kevin had them, some of them at least. I just hope he hasn't done anything silly."

• • •

xix. Surprise, Surprise

Olivia picks up the phone before I've heard a ring. I take a moment to describe my relationship with Dr. Leslie. I tell her he treats my headaches. I don't tell her anything more than that. I recount his worries regarding the decline in Kevin's work.

For a breath or two, Olivia is silent. Then: "Hard to believe he'd stop work on his thesis. It's all he ever did. You'd understand if you saw his apartment."

"Ah."

"I still have his car. I could come pick you up. I'd like somebody else to see it."

"Um, no. How 'bout I take the bus? What's the address again?" I have no intention of going. I'm already forming excuses in my head, reasons why I can't tour her brother's living quarters, reasons why I'm not the ideal person to cheer her up in times of need. But when she gives me the address—surprise, surprise—I write it down.

• • •

xx. A Goad, a Noose and a Bowl of Pudding

For the first time in a while, Ganesha climbs in the window. He stands there, rotund and golden, the heat of his body humidifying everything. The skin of his belly gleams. He's looking at the telephone. "Do you want me to come with you?"

In his hands are an elephant goad, a noose and a bowl of milky tapioca. The goad signifies movement, the movement to supplant obstacles. The noose captures illusions. The pudding can fill any void. His fourth hand, oddly enough, is empty. It hangs slack. The palm alone is like the whole of a baseball glove. I can sense his confidence in me. At the best of times, from regular people, misplaced faith is rather oppressive. This is too much. I shake my head. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

He stirs the bowl with one finger of his free hand. "Here," he says, offering it like a spoonful. "I think this'll help."

I open wide like an infant. Bolts of tapioca pop between my molars.

"Okay," I say. "Come with me."

• • •

xxi. A Subjective Idealist Proof for the Existence of Ganesha

Esse est percipi. The words come from Greek lecturer and staunch slave-owner Bishop George Berkeley, founder of subjective idealism.

Berkeley didn't believe in matter, only in mental events. He gave much thought to why it's important to accept perceptions at face value. Ours is to perceive, he said, never to reason. Berkeley would say I've given much too much reasoning to the question of Ganesha's reality. I should simply accept what is perceived. The zetetic in me, however, is doubtful.

• • •

xxii. The Bus

The bus is leaving campus and I'm on it. I've convinced myself that so long as I never have to cross the Lion's Gate (which I don't), as long as I stay on this side of the bay (which I will), I'll be fine. Yet still, my logic is barely holding up because the bus is crowded and I can't breathe. The only thing keeping me alive is a small, unfogged patch of window. I'm pressed against it, forehead first. Outside, Mooshika is galloping madly along Tenth Avenue. Ganesha sits improbably on his back, cross-legged and snug in his gilded throne.

• • •

xxiii. A Pair of Eggcups

Kevin's apartment is in the basement of a dilapidated house with a ruined porch. The entrance is at the rear. Olivia comes to the door and pulls me in with a grateful hug. "Thanks for coming, Peter!"
"You have no idea."

The interior of Kevin's apartment shares much with the building's limp façade. The wallpaper is torn, the floor's crooked, the furniture's a nudge away from kindling. Olivia points me to a tiny desk. A spiral-bound tome interrupts its plastic surface. "Here's what he was working on. He'd only just finished."

Looking at the sheer weight of it brings on a preemptive twinge of migraine. "So you've read it?"

"Some. It's mostly insane. It's just ravings."

The title:

Evidence in Support of the Seismic Interference Hypothesis
By Kevin Cheung.

Briefly, the words swim. Another twinge. I stave it off by averting my eyes, looking up at the more-or-less serene surface of the wall. There's a page stuck there with duct tape, presumably written by the man himself. Typed over and over, hundreds of times, is the same improbable phrase: *STOP PLATE TECTONICS. STOP PLATE TECTONICS. STOP PLATE TECTONICS...*et cetera.

"Kevin wrote this?"

"There's more under his bed. But most of it's in there." She indicates the thesis. "I want you to read it. I'm sure he was going crazy."

How can I say no? I take a seat at Kevin's desk, plucking up the corner of the first page. It creases inelegantly, much like the wall-coverings. Olivia plunks down on the bed. I wonder if she's planning to sit there until I finish. She starts rifling through boxes from under the bed. Before I've reached the bottom of page one, she's whimpering. In her hand is a wooden eggcup, carved to resemble a mustachioed soldier and topped with a knitted blue Santa's cap. Presumably, the egg sits inside the soldier's hollowed head and the hat goes on top, to keep your egg warm. Olivia rolls the cup in her fingertips as if the thing itself is made of eggshells. "I sent this to him last Christmas. Back home, I have the matching one. It's a girl." She plucks off the soldier's woolly hat and sniffles. "But she doesn't have one of these, see? She's has this blond wig, with pigtails."

It's funny the things you latch onto after somebody's gone. Autographed existential diatribes, for instance. Or eggcups.



xxiv. Empedocles versus the Volcano

Empedocles was whip-smart. He was among the first to believe light traveled at an incredibly fast but finite speed, a fact that wouldn't have any empirical corroboration for two thousand years. He was a snappy dresser as well. He paid particular attention to his feet. Everywhere he went, he wore custom made sandals cast in solid bronze.

When Empedocles was diagnosed with a fatal but prosaic illness, he hatched a plan to ensure that in death he would be apotheosized. He proclaimed that by leaping into Mount Etna he'd achieve immortality as a volcanic deity. He wasn't kidding. He climbed to the peak

and vanished.

Initially, everyone believed him. The mystery was impressive. Empedocles the Volcano God, they called him. But his divine ascendance was short-lived. Etna soon belched up one of his swanky sandals. It rolled down the mountain, steaming with cinder, and everyone realized: Empedocles was mortal after all.

• • •

xxv. The Last Time I Saw My Wife

We'd booked Katie at a four day Whistler ski-school between Christmas and New Years. I could see her in the back seat, chopsticks in her hair, bundled up in a puffy snow suit. She had a stack of books and games beside her. She was a smart girl. I had absurdly high hopes she'd grow up ostracized for her bookishness. Priya was loading the car. She was in white tennis shoes, jeans and a raincoat—one that cinched at the waist and flared out pleasingly at her hips. "You look good," I told her.

She batted her eyelashes. "I know."

"Be careful," I told her. "The highway going up could be pretty slick."

"You're sure you can't come?"

"It's too good an opportunity to put a dent in my book."

"Okay. We'll be back in time for New Year's."

"I'll prepare the fireworks."

She covered her mouth. "I nearly forgot!" She ran back in the house, coming back with a Christmasy, red-and-white package. Inside the car, Katie looked up expectantly from her book. Priya handed me the present. "A little something from Mumbai. I had forgotten it because it was too well hidden."

The box was heavy. I turned it over in my hands and the weight shifted unevenly. Inside, huddled in a nest of crepe paper, was a bronze statue of a portly man, naked from the waist up. He had four arms and an elephant's head.

"God of writers, you know."

I held the statue up to the window. "Look what daddy got!"

Katie frowned. "Weird."

Priya kissed me. "See you in a few days."

xxvi. Evidence in Support of the Seismic Interference

Hypothesis, by Kevin Cheung

Olivia let me borrow the thesis. I told her if I wanted to understand it properly I'd need to do some additional reading—at the library. Back on campus. It's only fair to Kevin, I told her. In truth, another headache was on its way. Understandable. Kevin's work is certainly dull and academic enough to qualify as sedentary. But it's hardly derivative. I only wish Priya could have seen it. It may've changed her mind; made her reconsider the outliers, at least.

Kevin's foundational premise: The human brain is an electromagnetic organ. At a basic level, synaptic activity is governed by tiny, electromagnetic pulses. As such, the organ is prone to influence from magnetic fields, and this made clear the influence of Dr. Leslie. Early on:

"...a consequence of this is the brain's susceptibility to interference and manipulation by electromagnetic events. On Earth, the most strenuous of these are caused by strain between opposing tectonic plates beneath the earth's crust. A correlation can be shown between even minor seismic events and a wide variety of psychological responses, including but not limited to the perception of Anomalous Light Phenomenon (ALP)."

xxvii. Our Lady of Fatima

Between May and October of 1917, around the thirteenth day of each month, the Virgin Mary appeared to a trio of shepherd children—Lúcia dos Santos and her cousins Jacinta and Francisco Marto. This occurred in Aljustrel, a small village on the outskirts of Fatima, Portugal. Lúcia, an articulate youngster, described her visions as "brighter than the sun" and possessing "light that spread out in every direction like infinite shards of crystal glass." By the time of Mary's final visit, 70,000 people had assembled in the pouring rain to catch a glimpse. What they saw, however, was inconsistent. Some saw Jesus,

Mary and Saint Joseph kneeling in pious prayer, blessing the crowd and so on. Some merely saw bright flashes of coloured light. Many saw nothing at all.

In his thesis, Kevin makes several references to the case of Fatima and events like it. He correlates nearly every publicized example of “Anomalous Light Phenomenon” – religious visions, ghostly sightings, UFO activity, et cetera – to quietly brewing earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, friction between mantle plumes and the general restlessness of the Earth’s mantle.

By the time I arrive at the final portion of the thesis, I’m not surprised to feel a phalanx of twinges closing in. I keep reading, however, because the final portion of the thesis is of particular interest, not only because it reveals Kevin’s obvious decline into madness, but also because he’s more specific. He’s so specific, in fact, that it sounds very much as if he’s describing me.

• • •

xxviii. Enduring Emotional Trauma

...some subjects were shown to be more susceptible to electromagnetic stimulation—and hence seismic interference—than others. This variance appears to correlate proportionally with variance among account descriptions during actual seismic events, such as with cases analogous to Fatima...

...strength of susceptibility among subjects is shown to be related to a number of factors including, but not limited to, a genetic predisposition to mental illness, past or recent trauma to the skull or spinal column, enduring emotional trauma, or a disproportionately high reliance on a single brain hemisphere (i.e. highly analytical or highly creative personalities)...

...those most acutely sensitive to seismic interference make sense of their experiences based on a complex gestalt of religious, socio-cultural and historic factors...

...in a laboratory environment using TMS equipment, my advisors and I have been able to successfully simulate highly complex forms of Anomalous Light Phenomenon in receptive subjects, including religious experience, spectral apparition and extraterrestrial visitation...

...more disturbing are how closely irrational behaviour correlates to ALP experience, manifesting in behaviours ranging from mild depression to violent outbursts. Worse still are the clear correlations between increased seismic strain and augmented rates of psychosis, criminal activity and suicide...

...I can only urge informed readers to cease analogous research and more radically, to work toward a viable system of slowing or halting terrestrial seismic motion altogether. I make these recommendations simply in the interest of broad psychological health...

• • •

xxix. Ganesha's Opinion

By the time I finish, my breathing has been slowed to the brink of asthma. My head is throbbing to a coarse, irregular beat. Ganesha thumps the window, tapping in time. "If you want my opinion," he snuffles, "it's bullshit through and through."

• • •

xxx. Odd Stuff

The sun is setting and for this I'm thankful. I hardly need it. I have an entire solar system inside my head. I could light up Plato's cave. I'm trying to stay clear but I can barely walk. This is a bad one.

I don't want to go back to Dr. Leslie. After Kevin's thesis, my treatments don't seem to leave me quite as hale and hearty as they once did. But Ganesha's probably right. Olivia's probably right. Kevin was a lunatic. Besides, my head's gushing with great cataracts

of light. And pain.

The doors at the lab are open but Dr. Leslie isn't in his office. I lurch into to the treatment room and the dentist's chair blazes like Christmas. The figure-eight machine nearly starts clicking of its own accord, willful in anticipation. I've watched Dr. Leslie press its buttons many times. I try one, but nothing happens.

"Peter?"

"I'm having another one."

He looks at the machine. "What were you doing?"

Behind my eyes, the universe begins.

Dr. Leslie eases me into my accustomed seat. "I can take care of this, Peter, but listen, I'd really like to get you under a CAT scan soon." He uncoils the cords, picks up the lovely device.

"Wait." I manage to place a hand on his arm. "Kevin Cheung."

"What about him? You found him? Is he all right?"

"Don't know. But I found the thesis. I read it." With a finger, I draw invisible circles around my eyes. "That's how it started."

"You read it?"

"He's insane."

Dr. Leslie looks at me sideways, prepping the machine. "Is that what you think?"

"Maybe."

Dr. Leslie leans over me. It makes me uneasy, but the pain's too much to do anything about it. I can't ask any more questions. I can't confront Dr. Leslie about overseeing Kevin's experiments. I can't give up the thesis. At least not until I get my treatment. I shut my eyes. Dr. Leslie pries one of them open with an irresistible thumb. I wonder if I'll sear him with the beams shooting out of my eye socket. "Here," he says. "Let me give you something. It'll make you more receptive."

Receptive. The word sets off a divine light show, but before I can object, Dr. Leslie has a syringe in my arm.

• • •

xxxi. Sizzles, Clicks and Hums

The waves are like great rolls of dough. At every crest the water boils. It sizzles and then subsides perilously, as if the whole sea was sinking. The clicks echo off great walls of water and there's no land

anywhere. There's not even a horizon.

Sudden light. Sunrise. I can see two cars, rolling end over end, down a cliff. I'm screaming at them to stop. I'm fissuring my lungs, mincing my throat. But the only sound I can make is a hopeless *click-click-click-click-click*.

• • •

xxxii. Raincoat, with Chopsticks

I can see the stars. Ganesha's here, shadowy and monstrous.

"Where are we?"

"Outside."

Below us there are trees. Cedars and an empty parking lot.

Ganesha's ears flap. "Sedentary and derivative."

"What?"

"You in a nutshell. You dropped out and nobody cared. You stopped writing, stopped going home, stopped doing anything. Nobody noticed." His voice is like a tack hammer. He's huge. He's huge. "Priya was right, wasn't she?" He's so huge.

"What's happening?"

"We're outside."

Mooshika's balled-up in a corner. He isn't saying anything. He's hunched over the edge, peering anxiously down at the pavement. I look Ganesha in the eye. "You're not real."

He shakes his head, waggles his trunk. "How much proof do you need?"

"I don't believe in anything these days."

Ganesha glances over the edge. His gravity tugs me. Below us, in the lot, there's a little girl with chopsticks in her hair. She's reading a book by lamplight. There's an anthropologist down there as well, in tennis shoes and a raincoat. They look like they're waiting for something.

• • •

xxxiii. Empedocles and Me

In part, Empedocles is remembered for his arrogance. He believed his fall would stand as proof of immortality. I'm hoping for just the opposite.

• • •

xxxiv. A Thoughtful Gesture

One of the cedars reaches up. It tries to snag me from the air. It's a thoughtful gesture. I appreciate it, but honestly.

• • •

xxxv. Thick Glass

The glass is warm, but the light behind it wavers. Katie swims past me inside the tank. She churns away, flickering like the light, then tumbles forward again. Her big grin is budding with teeth. Priya squeezes my thumb. I put my forehead against the glass. "Why do you think she's smiling?"

"She's happy to see you."

Katie, meanwhile, rumples her forehead and swims off.

• • •

xxxvi. Ganesha's Own Proof

"I'm sorry," he says.

"Why?"

"I wasn't myself earlier."

"I could tell."

"Go ahead," he says.

"Go ahead what?"

"Touch me."

His skin's warm and rough. His belly is like a drum. The palms of his hands are like dry leaves, his fingers like saplings.

• • •

xxxvii. People in Blue

Everything's white and there's no pain.

"Good morning," says a man in blue. I try to reply but only come up with phlegm, which the man dabs away with a handy cloth.

"What's happening?" I rasp.

"You had a nasty fall." He props me up with a pillow and leans

down, the tip of his nose inches from mine. "You're in VGH, okay? Does that make sense to you?"

No. But the man in blue has a kind face, so I humour him. "Make perfect sense. It's practically tautological."

His face goes dubiously pinched. I'm about to apologize when he smiles kindly and jogs off to fetch more of his kind. My bed is a choice one. By the window. Beyond the glass, however, the air is empty. There's no sign of Ganesha.

• • •

xxxviii. Case Closed

Olivia arrives with two bouquets, one from her and another from Dr. Leslie. She puts them on the bedside trundle. She grimaces, eyeing my plaster cocoon. "I came to see you at the department. I spoke to Kathryn."

"Did she say when she's coming to visit?"

Olivia clucks her tongue. "She didn't, but she says she knows you were living in your office. Is that true?"

I appraise my crooked limbs. "I think I know what happened to Kevin."

"You do?"

I tell her My Version of Events, the version in which I'm shanghaied by Dr. Leslie; in which Dr. Leslie exacerbated rather than treated my depression; in which he sent me off the deep end and, ultimately, off the roof—all in the interest of authenticating a set of ridiculous psych experiments. I tell her he likely did the same with Kevin. It's all in his thesis, I tell her. Mind control experiments! That's what they were up to. It's easy to ignore how foolish I sound because My Version is told with the facile calm of a detective's denouement. Olivia, however, is unimpressed.

She opens her purse. There's a book inside. I'm struck with a vague memory of long ago, something about once lending her reading material on a transatlantic flight. I remember saying, "Sure, take whatever you like. Look in my office." She puts the book on my chest. It's something by Camus.

"I meant to send it back to you," she says politely, as if My Version of Events never happened. Perhaps she's right. "Sorry, I kept forgetting."

She zips up her purse and turns for the door. Before leaving she informs me, "Kevin's not like you, Peter. He's stable. He'll be back any day." I try to reach out to her but it's merely an act of optimism, considering I can't move my arms.

• • •

xxxix. What I Heard in the Rehab Room

Kevin hung himself with some internet cable somewhere on the university endowment lands. According to a radio interview, he was discovered by a bird watcher and her husband. I don't envy them. Not the sort of thing you want to see through binoculars.

• • •

xl. Rehabilitated

For weeks I've been on treadmills, lifting weights, mashing rubber balls in my rickety fists. The people in blue tell me I'm rehabilitated. I can go home. Everything's serviceable, yes. My limbs work, but they wobble viciously. It's discouraging to find that for all my hard work, the only reward is a matching pair of limps and a clubbed foot.

Out in the fresh air and sunlight, I'm an ogre. A frail one, mind you, but ugly enough to scare the kids. After loading me into a taxi, the blue people lay crutches across my lap. The driver wants to know where we're going.

"Over the Lion's Gate," I tell him.

• • •

xli. A Reunion of Sorts

My little bungalow is the same as it ever was. The driver offers to help me indoors. I decline. I have to get used to doing things for myself. My keys still work. The neglected air sucks me inside, thankful to be stirred. I ignore the photographs.

In my study, I'm just about ready to run out of steam. I plop down at the desk. Perched beside the keyboard is a blemished statue buried in dust. It takes me a long time to polish it clean. It's very heavy.

• • •

xlii. Never a Hindu

I'm finished with doubt. Zeteticism isn't for me. I'm scrapping a sedentary, derivative book in favour of something more interesting. I'm going to try my hand at something called "creative nonfiction." I hear it's all the rage.

In a drawer I find a thick pad of paper and the only fountain pen that hasn't dried to a crisp. I uncork its lid. My handwriting isn't what it used to be, but I manage to scribble:

I've never been Hindu, but Ganesha's at the window again.

Et cetera.

• • •

xliii. Et cetera

No sooner has the pen hit the page that a thick, turmeric-yellow finger goes thump-thump-thump against my window. •

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Crave

Claire Litton

my hands smell of tobacco, not cigarettes
sweet and dry like an elderly cough
hidden, most ladylike, behind a napkin

your fingers passed me their own scent
palmed, a hidden coin

crushed herbs, bitter, a tangible lie
tempered with a heady freshness
the taste of the sky
the salt in the air
before you turn the corner to the sea

compiled, i'll build the hollow shell
from what i have to remember you,
defined by negative space
into a solid figure of wanting:

some scuff mark, some offering, some
torn piece of paper
with a hesitant phone number
too hastily called

you've left your imprint,
a golem scabbled from bits of string •

I feel no guilt, no irreconcilable sense of indecency when I entertain certain ideas.

The Other Side

D.T. Mitenko

By the third sip I am composed. My hand shakes imperceptibly, I see ripples in the coffee, but the face at least is a cool mask. This same composure has saved me before, against station agents, counter-intel, against even my own controllers. Now it has to fool one of *them*.

I noticed after the first taste. A glance at the watch, the incongruent numbers, and with the cup at my mouth I did the math and realized forty minutes was missing. Missing? No, I know exactly where that time went and who has it. I use the drink as a jerked, automatic gesture to hide behind as I wrestle with the urge to kick open the car door and dodge the stunners that wait for me, break through the trap and tunnel into the safety of urban anonymity, but I stay where I am. I take a sip. Because I'd never make it.

My routine is going to save me. I stay parked on the hillside, finish the coffee and contemplate my view of the Adrocksis Tower. The exact place where my image is being relayed back to *it*.

The Tower is an abuse of antigrav architecture. It rises out of the ocean, twists, swells and then peels open at the top like the petals of a giant plascrete flower. At the flower's base is the landing pad and I take note of the new arrivals and absentees since yesterday.

I am aware of it now, the blind spot pulled across my mind. There

wasn't enough time to fake memories but they've stretched a grey veil across the extracted gap. My subconscious, tricked into conspiring against me, blurs the cavity's edges and stitches them together. There's a cyst of emptiness tucked beneath my sense of continuity. I would never have noticed but for the glance at my watch.

My routine is going to save me. This is why I have a daily regime, because things like this happen to me. I am going to pull out of the parking lot and contact my controller like every other day but my hands are fists around the wheel and my body is half twisted for the door. It aches for action, even if it's for only a few seconds.

• • •

Take him down. He knows.

That is all *it* has to say. What they need is the simplest of gestures: a bitten lip, a nervous glance—anything can betray the tension, because *he* knows exactly what to look for. Then they'll step from their cars, turn from window-shopping with snub stunners in hand. It's paranoia but it's fuel. So long as I can keep it under control it will make me careful. *He* can't read minds, I tell myself... but that isn't entirely true.

There are three contact maps encrypted into the litter of graffiti in the alleyway off Nexus Avenue. I choose the newest one because I haven't used it before. From this point on who I am and what I know has to grow, expand. I have to diverge.

The decoded directions take me down to the Starport Quarter. I drive around the block once and gauge the location. The connect shoppe has three exits, one into the adjacent mall. The stall I am to use, second from the end, commands a good view down the intersecting roads and overhead.

The aroma of roasted coffee beans is thick, as if a fine layer of silt is draped across my skin when I enter. I walk the length of the long, narrow room, the stalls in a row down the center. The man behind the counter ignores me.

"Kierre 31," the screen remains dark.

"Minsk 77. Red Book One is broken." I am Red Book One.

There is a long pause at the other end and I try to guess which question will be first. The soundshield reverberates around me. It is a

special feature of the kiosk, activated by the proper keystrokes, available only if you know how to decrypt graffiti off Nexus Avenue.

"Are you clean?"

"No." I check the reflection of the skimmer that has landed down the road. Two figures are inside.

"How do you know Red Book One is broken?"

My fists clench under the keyboard. Because I am trained to know, that's how. Because I am missing forty minutes, that's how I know.

"Ignore that. Why do you think they're letting you run?"

Better. Much better. "I don't know. They...haven't impressed me." My contact won't believe this, of course, but I realize free thought is a factor in why I'm still running. They don't want me to know that I'm broken and the Fundament would have given that away.

"Hold on. I've got an urgent incoming."

That had better be a bloody important call.

• • •

I feel no guilt, no irreconcilable sense of indecency when I entertain certain ideas. Things like smuggling Adrocksis secrets back to the Allies, sabotage, lashing back in any way at the Empire that has broken my family. If I had been impressed I would recoil from the very act of contemplating these actions.

There was an article in a Paulsstar dataclip a few days ago, an editorial over the usefulness of the Fundament, whether or not impression really contributed to the Adrocksis cause. It was a serious, earnest piece that I found more tragic than comic. The author argued the merits of free thought as if the concept actually pertained to him.

Everyone knows about it. Everyone has it. It's public knowledge that they are under its influence; but impression is so insidious, it lurks so deep below conscious thought that people still believe they are free to question its worth, just like the author of that article. Asking whether the Fundament is truly assisting the Adrocksis cause is beside the point; what no one will ever question is whether the Adrocksis cause is worth assisting.

So I haven't been impressed. Why? Because Adrocksis counter-intel wants me to continue running. Ah. Following my routine is exactly what they want.

"Kierre 31, it's a trap—" I stop as my mission controller breaks protocol and his face coalesces out of the darkness of the flatscreen. "What the hell are you doing?"

"They're already closing in, lieutenant. We're going to have to go beta now. *Muistaa*."

"I'm not a lieut—" I twitch, an invisible hand grips my head and twists it aside. My vision doesn't change. My awareness of the connect shoppe remains strong but things are confused, hazy. I turn back but the face in front of me loses its place in my mind.

"I'm not a lieutenant..." but I hear my own uncertainty.

"You're a little too well trained to be running routine surveillance, aren't you? *Muistaa*. How did a backwater Justice from Aynrock end up here on Paulsstar? How come you don't remember anything after Allied basic training? *Remember*, you fool!"

They creep up from the back of my skull, pour into my frontal lobes, rivulets of ice that freeze inside of my head. For a moment I fear *tabula rasa* and, with a physical jolt, I think of Meredith, that I will lose her forever, and then I can only clutch myself in pain until the rivulets thaw and recollection returns. I am First Lieutenant Bryce Ranate, Liaising Agent, advanced recon, Green Dragon Company.

I remember the mission.

Once he sees that I am whole again my controller smiles. Grimly. "The rendezvous has been changed to 2027 Selert. Hurry."

"What about you?"

"It's already too late." He works his jaw, clenches his teeth and I can't look away. I have the same false cap in my M2 molar and underneath... His lips pull back into a skull's grin and the head snaps up. The tendons on his neck quiver white and I watch in visceral horror, imagining the flood of nanites now picking through his neurons, reaping a grey harvest of memories. *Tabula rasa*.

When his head lowers the eyes are wide, pleasant. He looks younger. There is an innocent smile on his face as he looks around but then the brow falls, the eyes narrow in suspicion. "Where the hell am I? Who... am I?"

"I know you."

The voice stops me just as I am bolting from the shoppe. It is coming out of the last stall in the row, a flashing "incoming msg" on the flatscreen. It's *him*.

"They put a mnemonic lock on your memories, did you know that? Your real name is Bryce Ranate, you're a lieutenant in the Allied Forces. We'll have it all uncovered, soon."

The reflection on the screen shows a second skimmer landing hard in the street and that's when the warm, viscous tentacles begin to pull down on my thighs. My shoulders droop under the irresistible weight. The pounding and roaring recede into a hum and my body falls away from me as I lurch towards the exit, bounce off someone, slam into the center post of the double doors and tumble down the stairs into the shopping plaza.

• • •

They say they are from the stars, the Adrocksis. But the truth is they just choose to forget they come from the same place as everyone else. They are the descendants of interstellar traders, asteroid miners and all the other societies built out of the hollowness of space. With each generation their contempt for us, the planetbound, burrowed deeper into their cultural consciousness until it reached the point where we were no more than a lesser species. By that point our enslavement was just a natural step.

The adrenaline isn't working. All I want to do is drop to my knees and rest, just a little, but I force my feet to jerk ahead, one step after another, until a great, oblique shape looms up and I slam into it.

"Stay the path, zero g!"

I bring my eyes up to the broad chest parked in front of me. A red uniform. A Sundog Transtellar Shipping logo. His large hand wraps around my shoulder and shoves me out of the way. Few of the shoppers notice. There is a lavatory three paces to the left.

"Sundog Transtellar? What's the matter, not good enough to fly with the real jockeys? Get spaced, starboy." I give him a hard shove back and lurch through into the bathroom. My hand catches the cold metal of the sink just as I pitch forward. I duck my head and suck in air, oxygenating the blood to keep the brain from sinking into

luxurious peace.

I pop the pill then. The one from the emerg kit velcroed to the underside of the stall in the connect shoppe. As soon as it hits my blood it will neutralize the homing nanites pumping through me. The ones they injected during my missing time.

The doors swing open and Sundog Transtellar comes through, one hand a fist and the other pointing a thick finger between my eyes. "Who the—"

Two nerve blows and I catch the unconscious body as it sags into my arms. Paulsstar isn't as repressed as other cultures and their bathrooms are open areas. Since there are no stalls, I leave him under the sink after I strip him down.

When I straighten up I catch my reflection in the mirror. Grey strands are flicked above the ears. Meredith never saw those grey hairs, I realize. It's been that long.

• • •

Two officers thunder past when I step out of the bathroom but they are looking for a runner in a dark jacket and bare head, not a Sundog uniform complete with cap. They're regular police on an off-route colony so I can't blame them. Still, it's their second mistake. Their first gaffe was using their stunners before they had completely landed. Skimmer engines interfere with stunner frequencies.

It isn't a *him*, I realize. It's an *I* that I am trying to outthink. Forty minutes this morning was time enough to fly me to the Adrocksis Tower, scan and return me to my car with a hole in my head and a coffee in my hand. Time enough to make that Other I, a database doppelganger, a quantum computer reflection of my mind. An entity they wouldn't hesitate to stamp with the Fundament.

Instead of taking the main plaza exit I turn back into the connect shoppe. There are now three skimmers outside and a plain clothes *right there* inspecting IDs of the unconscious. Through the window I see they are also checking everyone coming out of the main exit.

Past the officer checking IDs and up to the one at the door. Two uniforms ran past me in the mall, two are here and another is checking people coming out of the plaza. More are on their way but for now only one officer is free to supervise the mess...and one counter-intel

sitting in a skimmer, his face blank as he oversees the operation from uplink. My doppelganger shouldn't anticipate this next move because I would never do it in any other situation.

The dark visor turns to me and I note that the stunner setting is on broadbeam as I go for the nerve strike on his neck, take the weapon from him (but I have to break his wrist because the damned stubborn bastard won't let go), run the setting up to narrow beam to penetrate the Portavar armour and I take down the supervising officer, the three checking IDs and then run out at the counter-intel because he has ducked behind the dash for shielding. He can't escape the changing angle and goes down even as his skimmer begins to power up.

• • •

Airborne. Angry warning lights flash on the aircar's HUD; the chassis is coming apart because I used it to smash the other skimmers back at the plaza. The pilot AI has been overridden and I am shooting under radar, city rooftops slip underneath.

"They gaffed on that strike, opening up with their stunners before they had completely landed," the timbre of the voice in my ear is calm, soothing. "Of course, you can't really blame them, they're just regular police on an off-route colony.

"I know you're listening, Bryce. I know because I would have picked up the counter-intel's uplink if I was you." I recognize the same speech patterns, inflections that I am trained to use. He's negotiating, trying to calm me.

"It seems like another life when we were just a Justice back in Aynrock, doesn't it? Do you remember that one day...? All the paper-work was done and you decided to walk home. The Goldenseeds were in bloom and everything had that tinge to it like it was sunset in the afternoon. Do you remember thinking that? Just as you walked through the gates?"

Not fair. That isn't fair at all.

"It was Meredith's day off and she was working in the garden. The first thing you noticed in that golden light was her hair, that tousled, tawny mane. There was a streak of dirt on her chin and she laughed when you wiped it off. Shimon and Minette were playing in the yard, chasing each other around the well.

"We're not poets, you and I, but in that auburn haze I remember thinking in some ways we haven't changed since the days of Earth. We've forged ahead, touched the stars, and for some that meant never to return home again, but love still beat in the human heart. Do you remember thinking that, Bryce? Because I do." There's a long pause as he lets the memory soak in. Then: "You miss her so much, don't you?"

I punch the wheel forward and the skimmer dives between buildings. With my free hand I open the hydrogen feed as wide as possible and at the last second level up, kick the door open and dive out just before the aircar hits a parked cargoporter and disappears inside the violence of its own explosion.

• • •

2027 Selert is on the outskirts of town, a small shack run against an industrial park. The taxi drops me off a block away and I walk around to assess the area. At the end of the street I duck down the back alleyway.

Can't anybody see that?

But no, it's obvious to me because I've been trained to peer around the outline, to take in the seam that pulls it out from the background. In the backyard of 2027 Selert is a two-seater Tercel scout. Only the shape can be discerned, everything else about it fades into the colours and impressions of overgrown backyards and rundown residences. When I crouch I can make out the heatsink that plunges into the ground, extending its invisibility into infrared.

The commander of Green Dragon Company, my commander, Captain Joshua Takaheiko, is waiting for me inside.

• • •

"Report."

"They want us to proceed with the assault on the Adrocksis Tower but it's a trap. Her shuttle was on the landing pad this morning but I doubt the High Priestess is there anymore. Not if they got wind of us coming."

The mission is undone and the captain's anger is a hot, palpable

presence in the small room. He stands and the fury wraps around his shoulders. I know he hates what he has to say. A strike at the Adrocksis High Command would have been a crucial blow.

"We abort. You'll fly with me back to the rendezvous."

"One other thing, sir," I clear my throat. "They have a database doppelganger. Of me. From what I understand they've already broken some of the mnemonic locks."

I know locations, structures, passwords and protocols for resistance movements on a dozen planets. If this knowledge opened up through my Other I, hundreds of our secret allies would become enemies in a flash. All it takes is the Fundament.

The captain's dark, jade eyes peer across at me. "How did this happen?"

"I can only guess it was a high power stun, probably more than one. I have no memory of the event." It had to have been several stunners. I would've gone *tabula rasa*, otherwise.

They used to wipe us after every mission, once we'd been debriefed, to safeguard against this kind of situation. Failure rates were high back then. Incredibly high. Wiping mission memories took away that essential experience that turned Academy rookies into veterans. In the end, Allied Command terminated the practice, with some reservations.

"We have to destroy your doppelganger."

• • •

Meredith and I were lucky to settle on a planet that glowed with as much life as Aynrock. Right behind our house is a dense forest of oak and maple mixed with skrines and other indigenous flora. When the press squads came through I spent four weeks in those damp, prickly woods. There were dozens of us, all hiding from Aynrock's new Adrocksis masters. Meredith was caught in town. She and our children, Shimon and Minette, never had a chance to run.

Everyone warned me not to go back.

The Fundament lurks in a place deep in the human soul. Deeper than faith or love or loyalty. I still wake up sometimes to the sound of them pounding on the door and her weeping, fingernails digging into my arm, telling me it's for my own good. And all I can do is stare,

unable to comprehend how my love could betray me.

The first thing I did after I got off Aynrock was sign up for basic training.

• • •

Every hour that goes by we diverge and I am still a step ahead. My Other I doesn't know, for example, about the ID set, uniform and prosthetics that get me through security at the Adrocksis Tower.

When the first muffled thuds begin I am already in the elevator. The mission I came here for was to locate the High Priestess and coordinate the strike from inside, but now I am the mission. Green Dragon Company is simply putting holes in the tower from a safe distance while I ascend to the twenty-second floor: Scanning, Imaging, Data Acquisition and Storage.

Military thugs push me aside as another thud ripples through the superstructure. There is the acrid whiff of smoke in the air. After several dead-ends I find two guards at the end of a long, sterile hall.

"Crimson clearance only."

I nod, reach into my front pocket as if I have the ID tag then catch his outstretched hand, disarm him and throw him to the ground in order to get a clear shot at the second guard.

Inside is a scanning lab. There are eight stations, each with a spider's array of diagnostic sensors suspended over imaging beds. The cots have wrist and ankle bonds and ride on articulated arms that slide into the cavities where the scanning takes place.

The cots have gray units on them as well. I sweep the stunner over the surprised technicians an instant before I am lugged backwards. When the units hit full strength, my mind tells me I am falling even as my feet leave the floor. I get my hands behind my head just as I crack against the cot. The weight squeezes out my breath and I strain to pull air back into my chest.

• • •

"All I had to do was ask. They grant you so much freedom when they know you can be trusted implicitly." There is a hint, a *hint*, of superiority. I guess I would be feeling good too if I had just outsmarted

my own personal enemy. "I didn't want them to be around when you showed up—we're still similar in that way, the lone wolf mentality—so I just asked for access to the grav units.

"We've diverged even since this morning, haven't we? I can see things now from a perspective that I know you have to ignore, and you have undoubtedly acquired much that I am still unaware of. But it's still our similarities that distinguish us, Bryce, our core values. You don't have to put up this struggle. The battle is over. We've won."

"I'll be an empty furrow before you get anything from me." I prod the false molar cap with my tongue. There is still an option there.

"We've already got everything from you. It's only a matter of time before we crack all of the mnemonic locks. What I was talking about was you and me. We've won."

"We're enemies," I wheeze under the high grav.

"No. We're the same person and we both want to be on the same side. This one."

I laugh but the sound slides down my windpipe. "They must've flipped a few qubits during the scan. You couldn't possibly be me."

"Ohh, Bryce. We share a rotten secret, you and I, one that you could never even admit to yourself. I can, though: you want to get caught. You've always wanted to get caught."

"Liar!"

"An espionage agent, Bryce? We were a Justice back on Aynrock, a fancy word for sheriff, and now you're a military spy operating in deep cover for covert ops. And you volunteered for it. You know why? Because you knew it was the way back to Meredith."

"Don't you dare bring her into this, you pathetic attempt at consciousness. I could never support the Adrocksis or the Fundament. I hate what they did to my life. To my family!"

"Bryce it's me. You! Yes, you hate the Fundament. You want nothing more than to free humanity from its insidious grip. But there is another force driving you-Bryce-I-am-you. I know what you want. Tell me what I already know!"

Even my eyelids feel heavy as I close them. He's right. "I want to go home."

"Yes!" There is triumph in the disembodied voice. "You hate it so much but to get stamped by that horrible Fundament and go home, to just see Meredith and the kids one more time, is a loathsome,

beautiful thought that has been prowling in your mind since the day you left them.

"You may not remember what happened during that missing forty minutes but I do. You felt the stunners, Bryce, you knew what was happening and you didn't go *tabula rasa*. You didn't want to forget."

I swallow the hard lump in my throat. A heavy tear streaks down the side of my face and smashes against the highgrav cot.

"You failed," I whisper.

"No. We've won."

"*Muistaa*."

"Wha—?"

"*Muistaa!*" This time I shout it and I taste the putrescence as it leaves my mouth.

"I...what..." The voice distorts as the mnemonic locks open and my Other I is inundated with a flood of memories. For a moment I am panicked by the thought that the grav units aren't on a dead switch, but then the world realigns itself and I fall to the ground.

Time is short but I walk to the panel that I've identified as my doppelganger's home. I pry it open and place the optic detonator among the electronics. My Other I still sputters. When the console cracks, splits open and smoke leaks out I am already at the window, looking over the city.

When the Allies win there will be no rejoicing in any of the conquered territories. No parades, no festivals. Only a ragged few, like the ones in the forest in Aynrock, will welcome their freedom. The rest of them, those billions of people stamped by the Fundament, will go scrambling to place themselves back under the thumb of a dead tyranny.

Sometimes I wish they still erased my mission memories. •

There are others like Albert.
There's that woman in
Pittsburgh, whose husbands
kept committing suicide after
signing over their estates.

Made

Paul Hosek

She's in there. With him. Oh God, please forgive me.

"Did you see that?" asks Needs-the-window-seat.

"Did I see what?" I say, although I know exactly what he means.

My neighbour tips his chin towards the washroom in first class. "That," he says. Albert, the guy I've been tailing, is leaving it. There's a film of sweat on his forehead. He wasn't in there alone.

You see, Albert's a Maker. He Made that poor stewardess fuck him in the washroom. He's good. Not a word or a movement, and Vanessa became his slave. Other Makers I've seen need to speak, or make some kind of effort to gain control, you know, a look, or a touch. Something. Not him. He's the best. A Maker's Maker.

Vanessa emerges from the washroom shortly after. She looks a bit dishevelled and lost. The other passengers politely look away.

I check my face. My lips pout back at me in the compact's fungous reflection. It's been six years. Albert wouldn't recognize me. Hell, I don't recognize me.

"So she was helping that guy in the john. Big deal." I say, snapping the compact shut. I reach for my rum and coke. My hand is shaking a little.

"Yeah, but helping him with what?" Needs-the-window-seat's shoes are off. His feet stink. "They've been in there for a while."

"So?"

"Well, I think they were doing it."

"Doing what, exactly?"

"You know, 'It'."

I give him my best incredulous look; I'm young enough to be Window-seat's daughter.

"You know, boffed, boinked, made the beast-with-two-backs..."

"I get it," I say curtly. "That young flight attendant, who looks like she just walked out of a Victoria's Secret catalogue, picks some dumpy, middle-aged passenger..."

"Maybe they know each other?"

Albert settles his bulk into a seat five rows ahead of me. He holds his glass in the air, rattling the ice. Vanessa pours him another drink.

"Well, she could do a whole lot better than that guy," I say.

"Ever heard of the Mile High Club? Hell, I'd do it in a second if I could get away with it," Window-seat says with a smirk. He fingers his ring absently. Cocking an eyebrow, he tilts his head towards the wash-room suggestively.

"Oh, for Christ's sake. Not if you were the last guy on Earth," I say.

Window-seat rattles his newspaper with a chuckle, and returns to the sports section.

When we land in Seattle, I'll alert the Bureau. They'll contact Vanessa. She won't remember anything of course. They never do.

They'll bring her into one of those security rooms and some suit will try to explain that she may have been sexually assaulted. They can't reveal when or by whom, Homeland Security, but they'll offer all the best medical treatment. Counselling, the morning after pill, prophylactic antibiotics. Anti-retrovirals.

She'll think they're crazy. She'll demand to see her lawyer. The suit will remind her that she's not under arrest. She'll walk out.

Later she'll have the dreams. She'll have trouble with intimacy. Her relationships will fall apart. There'll be headaches, unexplained mood swings, abdominal pain and other manifestations of post-traumatic stress. The body knows the truth even if the brain doesn't. Some movies will make her sick, or panic. She won't know why.

God, how many of those things have I sat in on? Way too many.

She might stop having periods. Or worse. If she knew I'd just sat there and let it happen, that I could have stopped it, she'd call me a fucking

bitch. She'd be right. She'd want to kill me. Get in line, girlfriend.

There are others like Albert. There's that woman in Pittsburgh, whose husbands kept committing suicide after signing over their estates. We apprehended her, our first one, our first Maker. What a disaster. We lost four agents in that one. She's in a drug induced coma in Quantico. I'll bet they're still trying to figure out what to do with her.

Remember that guy who shot up the 7-Eleven in Detroit in November? Killed three people before shooting himself? He was Made to do it. That woman who jumped off her tenth storey balcony last week with her kid? Made.

They're all monsters, all of them. John showed me that.

• • •

"...and then there's the risk from radiation exposure," John said. It was our first meeting. We were in one of those secret basement interrogation rooms in the Hoover Building.

"Radiation? From what?" I asked. I remember blowing cigarette smoke in his face. I hated him right away. He was too much; the chiselled features, greying temples, and an English accent to boot. Cute though.

"We'll be using real time PET scanning to monitor your brain activity during the biofeedback process. You'll receive injections of neurotransmitter analogs, chemicals your brain will incorporate and metabolise."

I pretended to yawn. He continued, "They'll follow the same chemical pathways that your own natural neurotransmitters take during various cognitive processes. Those analogs are labelled with radioisotopes, which will allow us to track them. They'll help us map out the active areas of your brain during the... training process," he explained.

"So you'll have a radioactive map of my brain while I'm being Made?"

"Sort of. The PET scans will show us the hot spots, areas of high activity. With that information we hope we'll be able to train you to alter those pathways. Rewire you. We hope to create a conscious state that will allow you to resist the target's control."

"You want to make me 'Make-proof'."

"Well, more like Make-resistant." He cleared his throat. "These radioactive tracers aren't dangerous if used once or twice, but we don't

know how often we'll need to perform the tests. Therefore you'll likely be exposed to a hazardous amount of radiation, even if you wear shielding—"

"And if I am?"

"Well, you could experience difficulties with fertility, birth defects—"

"I don't want any kids."

"Hair loss, nausea, diarrhea."

"I'll wear a wig, and drink Pepto-Bismol."

"Your immune system will be weakened. You'll be susceptible to infection."

"You've got antibiotics, right?"

"Cancer."

I put out my cigarette and laughed.

"Agent Carter...Lisa, this is very serious. You could die from this."

I looked at the guy for a minute. He wasn't kidding. How do you stop a Maker? I thought. Somebody who can tell you to do just about anything and you will? They can't be arrested. They can't be detained. And, after all, they still have their rights. Somewhere within our joke of a legal system will be a human contact they can exploit. And a trial by jury? Forget it.

I brushed the ashes from the consent form. "I understand the risks. I could die or get seriously fucked up, and I can't hold you responsible. Or the Government. Where do I sign?"

He looked shocked. "There," he indicated with a glance.

"When do I get to meet my Maker, so to speak?"

He paused and folded his hands neatly on the desk. "You're talking to him."

• • •

The seat-belt light flickers off with a ding. The guy beside me taps me on the shoulder.

"Do you mind?" he asks.

Needs-the-window-seat is now Needs-the-washroom. I close my laptop and turn my legs aside to let him pass. As he does he whispers, "Maybe I'll get lucky."

Dickhead.

Where do Makers come from? Who knows? Someone's Cold War

science project probably. Maybe they're the result of spontaneous mutation, the latest fad in human evolution. Viruses, recreational designer drugs gone wrong, you name it. Everyone at the office has a favourite theory, no one knows for sure. Maybe they've always been here? I don't really care.

Albert coughs. I catch a glimpse of the back of his neck. He has a telltale lesion, an irregular black splotch, a Kaposi's sarcoma. I know because I have them too.

When we land in Seattle, Albert won't be able to find his luggage. We've arranged for it to go missing. When he gets to the baggage claim office, he'll be asked to go to a room and fill out a form. I'll be there, waiting for him.

Self-consciously I pull my sleeves down. I have the forearms of a heroin addict. Tracks. Burnt out veins. They still sting.

• • •

For six months, I was Pavlov's dog and Skinner's pigeon. When the isotope was injected, my veins caught fire.

In a lab, hooked up to monitors and videotaped, John would Make me. I hated it. I'd emerge from the darkness standing half way down the hall, or holding a toy gun to my head or some other task that John had Made me perform. I would then be scanned, my brain digitally dissected.

Some days I wouldn't leave the scanner at all, and I would lie still in the giant, humming white coffin for hours.

"Are you all right in there? Do you need anything?" John would ask over the speaker.

"I need to pee." This became our little joke. Sometimes I'd say, "Yeah, I need a vacation, how 'bout a relaxing week in Guantanamo?" or, "A triple rum and coke with a twist of Quaalude," or, "I need to see your skinny ass in a Speedo," or some shit. He always had this goofy little laugh.

Later, during one of our afternoon exercise sessions, he asked me, "What does it feel like, being Made?"

"At first I couldn't tell, you know? I'd just slip under without realizing. But now," I took a draw off my cigarette and exhaled, "now it's like that powerful urge to sleep, like, when you've had too

much to drink. You can feel that something's not quite right, but the urge to let go and pass out is just too strong. And then suddenly there's nothing. Just blackness."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. Well... except..."

"Except what?"

"I know this is going to sound dumb, but sometimes I can see this little light. A little blue speck. It isn't always there but..."

"Well, then maybe it's that light we need to explore. I'd like us to try something today, some focusing exercises. Have you ever heard of a Zen Koan?"

• • •

The plane drops a little. Turbulence. Albert turns his head, and looks behind him. It's sudden and intentional. I'm sure he's spotted me. His eyes meet mine briefly. They're grey. I look down at my laptop. Did he see me? Does he recognize me? Please, not now. It's too soon.

I'm waiting for that feeling, for that awful wave of fear and nausea, that sickening gut-ache followed by oblivion. I'm waiting for him to Make me. Will I be ready? Can I resist him?

I'm desperately trying to remain unseen, hiding behind the headrest in front of me. I pretend to be an uptight executive, hammering away at her computer, trying to meet another pointless deadline. Please, God, make him stop staring at me. The others were right. I shouldn't have gotten this close. But who else would stand a chance against him?

"How much longer to Seattle?" I hear him ask the older flight attendant. The one he didn't Make. The one he didn't rape.

He had not been staring at me. He'd been trying to get her attention. My back is slick. I can smell my own sweat.

• • •

They'd tried other techniques on previous agents. What they needed was a conscious but dissociated state, like the one often reported by victims of horrible trauma. Like rape victims, or people with near-death experiences.

There were pharmaceuticals that came close, things like ketamine or variations of it, but they always left the operative too spaced out to be of any use in the field. Neurosurgery was another option they considered: strategic lobotomies, neurostimulator implants, ligation of the corpus callosum, that information superhighway between brain hemispheres. But none of this worked. With me they used good old classic conditioning and biofeedback. Psych 101.

John and I spent days watching videotapes of me, and the others before me, as well as surveillance of Makers still at large. Sometimes I felt sick when I saw myself. I was a puppet in John's hands, a stupid little meat marionette. Sometimes I'd vomit while watching it. I blamed it on the isotopes, and John increased my dosage of compazine.

I watched my PET scans evolve, the images slowly changing, and began to understand the science behind what we were doing.

We tried breathing exercises, sleep deprivation, visualisation, meditation, hypnosis, anything to diminish the metabolic activity between my limbic system and frontal cortex.

We needed to teach those areas not to talk to each other, at least not to speak directly. These were the areas of the brain responsible for integrating sensory information and conscious thought. This was the birthplace of volition, of spontaneous activity. It was through this corridor of glistening neurons and organic molecules that John was convinced the Makers gained their control. The training was designed to bypass those connections.

I developed a cough. At first it was just annoying. Then one day there was blood. I pushed the panic button in the PET scanner.

"Is everything okay?" John asked through the speaker.

"Something's wrong."

When they pulled me out, the entire front of my hospital gown was stained bright red. I covered my mouth and coughed, my hand was slick with something warm and wet. I couldn't walk. All around me were concerned faces speaking terse medical jargon. A large plastic hose was jammed down my throat and unconsciousness came intravenously.

I recall this feeling, like when you've exhaled all the air from your lungs and sink to the bottom of a swimming pool. Except this pool was pitch black and bottomless. Occasionally there were sounds, voices. But I just kept falling, slowly falling.

There was this tiny pinpoint of light. It grew larger ever so slowly. Like over days, weeks. Then I could see movement in it, figures and faces. The sounds got louder.

And then I woke. Lying in bed, I was surrounded by beeping and digital alarms. John was sitting beside me, holding my hand. He told me that I'd been there for a month.

"You have disseminated tuberculosis," he said. His cheeks were hollow, his eyes sunken. "It eroded into one of your pulmonary vessels. But Lisa...they also found... you also have..."

"AIDS."

"You knew? How did you...?"

"I lied on the application. I wasn't showing any signs yet and I knew that there was no mandatory HIV testing so—"

"We can't continue with the experiment, Lisa. It's far too dangerous. Your CD4 counts are way too low—"

"Has anyone else gotten as far as I did?" I asked. John paused and looked at the ground.

"Then we have to keep going," I said, touching his face. "I need... to keep going John."

• • •

I know a lot about Albert. Born Albert Joseph Rainham to an unwed teenage mother, he was given up to Children's Services. He went through no less than five foster homes. At the age of twelve he was remanded to a juvenile correctional facility for burglary and possession of a firearm. At the age of fifteen he was released, and shortly thereafter, his foster parents committed suicide under strange circumstances. Then he disappeared. Maybe that's when he discovered he was a Maker.

I picked up his trail after he walked out of a Las Vegas casino with almost eighty thousand dollars. He calmly strolled out, even lit up a cigarette in front of a security camera. The showoff. Then, once again, he vanished. The casino didn't know how he did it. That's when he came to our attention.

So far the public doesn't know about them and we like it that way. Why not just kill them? The military and political applications are just too good to pass up, I suppose. Imagine a Maker intelligence bureau.

Maker soldiers. Maker police. A Maker in the White House. All of it controlled by your government. The possibilities are endless.

The guy beside me returns from the washroom and squeezes past me into his seat. All the passengers in first class laugh simultaneously at one of the movies. I'm not wearing headphones so I don't get the joke.

Albert is laughing too, louder than anyone. Since I started tailing him I've watched him steal, seen him rape. He's Made at least three people end their own lives. And now he's laughing.

• • •

Less than a week after they took me off life support I was back in the lab, placing an electrode array on my bare scalp.

"Am I ever going to have hair again?" I asked.

"It's too early to tell," John said.

"Well, at least I don't have to worry about waxing."

John forced a smile. "Are you ready to begin?"

"Before we get started," I asked, "why are you doing this?"

"Because it's my life's work, because I'm an experimental neurologist—"

"What I mean is, why aren't you like the others? Like the other Makers?"

John thought for a second. "Maybe it's because I am like them. Just like them. That's why I'm doing this. You know, 'There but for the grace of God go I' and all that. It wouldn't take very much, you know, for me to be like Albert—"

"You could never be like Albert."

"It wouldn't take very much for anyone with so much power over others to become like him. Call it my lack of faith in humanity. I'd just feel better if there was a check in place, a safeguard. Do you see what I'm saying?"

I nodded.

"Are you ready to begin?" he asked.

"Fire away."

John began to Make me. My head started to spin, and the world went black. I remember the urge to vomit, and a sensation, like ants crawling all over my fingers and toes. My mouth tasted like chalk. In front of me was an opening in the darkness, a small television screen

in a pitch-black room. I began the focusing exercises, concentrating on the oval light before me.

Somehow this was much easier than before, much more natural to me now. I let the light become everything. As I did, I realised I could see my own emaciated hands through it, clenching and unclenching. I could see John across the table from me. From there I could hear a voice speaking to me. Its tone was commanding, yet I couldn't quite make it out.

"What?" I said.

"What did you say?" asked the voice. It was John's.

"I can't hear you very well, John. What were you saying?"

"I'm trying to Make you, I told you to stand on one leg and place your hands on top of your head."

"I have a better idea John. Why don't you just piss right off?"

"Oh my God," he said with a laugh. "You're doing it."

"And also, while you're at it, why don't you kiss my Yankee ass?"

"You're actually resisting me. It's working..."

• • •

I'm sitting in a room with hidden surveillance. It has only one door. It will close and lock behind him when he enters. It's supposed to be soundproofed but I can still hear the airport public announcement system through the ventilation.

I'm sitting behind a desk. My team has instructions not to enter the room until Albert is down. No matter what happens to me. If I'm the one who goes down, or gets killed, their orders are to remotely unlock the door and let him walk. I can't risk their exposure. They think I'm carrying a stunner, and three syringes of ketobarb, a fast acting tranquilizer. I'm not.

"Is this baggage claim?" Albert asks, as he sticks his head through the door.

"It is. Please come in and have a seat." I smile my fiercest smile. My cheeks hurt from the effort. I've even whitened my teeth for this.

The door closes behind him, and just as he approaches the chair, the locking pin slides into place. We both hear it. He tugs and rattles the doorknob.

"Oh, that's cute." A smile spreads across his face. "Really fucking

cute.”

He’s shorter than I recall. His hair is a greying blonde down, thinning above the forehead. The tip of his nose and the top of his head are sunburned. His ears are peeling. He turns the chair around in front of my desk and straddles it. His belly strains against the confines of his designer shirt. Gold chains dangle from each wrist. I notice the Rolex as he cracks his knuckles.

As I begin to speak my throat becomes tight. Suddenly I’m hyperventilating. He’s Making me, or trying to. My limbs become heavy and numb, my hands clench into useless claws, even as I reach for the firearm in my shoulder holster.

We underestimated him. Albert is much stronger than I thought. I’m drowning in a tidal wave. A choked scream leaves my lips as I black out.

I’m back in that swimming pool with my eyes closed, drifting downwards. It occurs to me that I may already be dead.

• • •

John and I were walking on the grounds of the research facility, arm in arm like old friends. The PET scan confirmed it, John’s theory was right. My brain had formed new connections. He could no longer Make me. Could Albert?

“John, what happens when a Maker meets another Maker? Can a Maker control another one?”

“I don’t think anyone knows, frankly. We’ve yet to test that. I have a few thoughts on the subject.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ve got more than just a few, Johnny boy.”

“I like your hair.”

I mussed it up in a fit of self-consciousness.

“Please, I look like a dyke. Or a skinhead late for a haircut.”

“No, really. It suits you somehow. I’m not just saying that because you’re my star pupil.”

“No, you’re saying that to change the subject. What if you can’t control them John? What if you can’t control *him*? Albert I mean. What if he hurts you?”

“Don’t worry about me. I have some very carefully controlled experiments in mind, I won’t be in any danger.”

“He’s never going to be punished, is he?” I stopped walking and

stared him down. "After everything he's done..."

"Lisa, you know I can't talk about any of this. But you have to believe that it's all going to work out. You have to trust me." He gave my arm a squeeze, and touched my cheek. "It'll all be for the best. We need him for our research. Without him, we'll never stop the others."

His eyes looked so sad, so worried, even as he tried to smile.

"Don't worry John, I'll get your man."

• • •

Somewhere in the darkness, a little fleck of light, that little spot which contains the entirety of my sensory experience, flickers on. I begin to concentrate, performing the focusing exercises John taught me. I force myself into the mandala of light, I allow it to engulf me, ignoring the darkness around it. It enlarges so that I can see movements and details. I can make out sounds.

Once again, I can see my hands, resting on the desktop. In front of me is my nine millimetre. Albert is sitting across the desk from me. My wallet, my palm computer, my identification and my cash are arrayed in front of him like a tarot. The cigarette he's smoking is mine too. Newport Milds. How long have I been out? What have I told him? Does he know about my rewiring?

"So, the FBI is hip to my little mind games, huh? What were you going to do, arrest me?"

He's expecting an answer. I decide it's okay to speak. My voice sounds strange, tinny, like a recording.

"No. I came here to tell you that you're a dead man."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you're dying. You have HIV, Albert. You've had it for a long time."

"How could you know that? Nobody knows. That doctor—"

"Is dead. You killed him. You Made him take an overdose of anti-depressants. I know that you have it, Albert, because I have it too. I got it from you."

I pick up the palmcomp and tap it on. I open one of my video files and set it to replay continuously.

"We first met six years ago," I say. "I was a Sheriff's Deputy in Oregon. You were driving a vehicle reported stolen by the owner. I was

working alone that night, and I pulled you over. Remember?"

"No, but go on."

The screen is small and the resolution poor, but the events are discernible. The video appears to be shot from a dashboard-mounted camera. A man and woman are engaged in sexual intercourse over the hood of the car. It's early evening on a deserted stretch of coastal road. The woman is wearing the state police uniform. The man's pants are around his ankles. His face is visible as he looks down the deserted highway. The woman shows no emotion, nor does she struggle. She stares mindlessly at the sky. Her firearm and baton rest on the hood beside her. Well within reach.

"Well, shit. That's me... and you," he says grinning. He has a single golden premolar. It sparkles. "I barely remember that night, I must have been wasted."

"I didn't remember it either, until I reviewed my tapes the next morning. I didn't know what to make of it for a long time. It's not like I could show it to anyone or talk about it. There was no record, no file on you anywhere. I couldn't identify you. Nobody would believe—"

"You look better with long hair."

"Then I donated blood. They test for HIV. That's how I found out. I kept that a secret too. Pretty soon there was nobody left in my life. There was only my work. But being good at my job means driving a desk, trapped in an office. I'd never find you that way. When the FBI finally considered my application—"

"I can't believe how fat I was back then."

"Then I heard about this secret project. Rumours within the Bureau about special kinds of criminals, and a special program designed to stop them..."

"This'll be great for my website. Me bagging a cop," he says and places the palm computer in his shirt pocket.

"Then I saw you Albert. On a security camera, on the Strip, in Vegas."

He looks at his watch and says, "So you joined the FBI to try to get me, is that it? Well, here I am. Go on. Cuff me." He laughs as he holds his wrists out in front of him.

"I didn't bring handcuffs."

"Well, you sure are pretty but you ain't too smart, now are you, Special Agent Lisa Carter? What were you going to do, negotiate? Bore me into custody? I'm getting a little tired of this episode of 'This is

Your Life', so I think you'll just have to eat your gun." Then he adds forcefully, "now."

I pick up my firearm.

"I want you to shove the barrel all the way to the back of your throat, 'til you gag," he says. "You know how to do that, don't you? Sure you do."

I remove the homemade single-shot silencer from my shin holster. It squeaks as I attach it to the end of my pistol. His eyes grow wide with comprehension. I wish he could see his face as I take aim at his forehead.

My finger won't pull the trigger. I stand up and thrust the barrel against his forehead. I yell in frustration. I change hands. I use both hands, but no matter what I do, I can't fire the shot. I hear the door's locking pin slide open.

I raise the pistol over head, if I can't shoot him at least I can smash his skull with it.

"Agent Carter, put it down," says John. "Please Lisa. Just put it down." I do.

"You fucking asshole. You did this to me didn't you?"

John looks at the ground. I sit in my chair and turn away from them both.

I've been subliminally reprogrammed. Yes, I could resist the Makers, but what other rewiring had occurred, what other hidden commands or restrictions were implanted in my mind? So this is how they'd control them.

I would be the first of a team of Make-proof watchdogs, programmed for obedience. We would keep the Makers in line, and John or somebody else would hold the strings. I am a slave.

"Lisa, I'm sorry," John says, "but it has to be this way."

"I understand."

"Mr. Rainham, would you come with me please?" John asks tersely.

I hear Albert chuckle in relief. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him break into a smile. I feel the heat of his stare like a fire against the side of my face, but I won't look at him.

Assuming there are no limitations against shooting myself, a bullet passing through my skull might kill him at this range. Before anyone can act, I bring the pistol to my temple and squeeze. •

"A horse can afford not to care.
A human must help."

Making Light

Allan Weiss

For just a few minutes, Eliezer's brain fooled him into thinking that he was a healthy man again. The eastern horizon glowed with what looked for all the world like the dawn, and Eliezer knew—*knew*—that he had not yet awakened that night to answer the call of nature. Could it really be, then, that he had slept for seven or eight hours without interruption?

"A little thing," he said, "but a miracle nonetheless."

He walked a short way from his camp and relieved himself, careful to keep holy thoughts from his mind even as he yearned to praise God for such a gift. But his brief stroll took him past Melech, who stood dozing atop a rocky dune, and on his way back to camp Eliezer made the mistake of saying, "A long sleep like that may foretell other nights when I actually get some rest."

In reply, Melech neighed sleepily and advised him to look up.

"Up?" One glance at the stars made his heart sink. Such hope! And so quickly dashed! The constellations had hardly moved; as far as he could tell, it was only a little past midnight. "Such a shame." Melech made it clear that he wanted to go back to sleep, and shook his mane gently as he lowered his head. Still, Eliezer couldn't resist asking, "Then why is the sun trying to rise at the same time as old men suffering

old men's problems?" The horizon shone with a flickering light, and Eliezer nodded. "The desert blazes even at night, eh? But what can burn?"

Melech said he didn't care.

"A horse can afford not to care. A human must help." *Especially me*, he thought; there was his true curse. For his presumption in poking around in God's secrets, he'd been condemned to spend eternity doing *mitzvahs*. Is it a *mitzvah* if one is forced to do it? That was a theological question he would consider in the morning; right now, he had no choice but to investigate.

"Someone may be injured. Someone may need our assistance."

And someone else may be around to offer it, Melech suggested, although clearly not convincing even himself. With a snort Melech lowered himself just enough to let Eliezer climb onto his back. Only now did Eliezer notice the stabbing pain over his left kidney, from sleeping on a hard, cold ground in a bad position. Winter was coming; Chanukah would begin tomorrow, and the solstice was not far away.

"We'll need some shelter soon," Eliezer said, and added with a shrug, "What better reason to find some work?"

So they rode down the hill, following the light that beckoned in the east (thus reenacting the legend of the *goyim*, may they learn the truth someday). Melech kept his pace even but frustratingly slow, as if to make it clear he did not appreciate having his slumber disturbed. Eliezer knew of no town in that direction, nor of any caravans whose leaders were so foolish as to travel at night. So where could the light be coming from?

"*Nu?*" Eliezer asked. "What do you think?"

Melech remained silent. But then his head jerked up, and he stared off at something Eliezer's age- and sleep-bleared eyes couldn't discern.

"What? What is it?" Melech stopped, and Eliezer climbed down. "*Oy*. Or do I want to know?" It didn't take him long to find the source of the glow. On a low rise in the distance, something metallic rose above the desert sand and stone, reaching toward the sky like a man with arms stretched to the limit. As he trudged through the grit toward it, he let out a low, stunned, "*Gevalt!*"

Melech advised him to withdraw, return to their camp, and leave the thing alone.

“You know better. Shush.”

There was no question what it was, but there were plenty of questions about it:

What was a giant menorah doing standing in the middle of the desert?

Who had made it, and why?

And who had lit the one giant candle at its top, whose towering yellow and blue flame blazed steadily even in the night breeze?

“A nice mystery, Melech. How can you not want to try to solve it?”

Melech had some uncomplimentary things to say about mysteries—based, it was true, on plenty of experience. But whether they pursued the matter wasn’t up to him, as he knew full well.

A giant menorah: eight empty candleholders the size of village wells, and one holder towering over the others bearing up the king of candles, its wick a rope the diameter of his (admittedly ropy) arm. And the menorah was a rich gold, a fact that explained how it reflected the candlelight into an all-encompassing glow that made it difficult to imagine how brightly the thing would shine with a full complement of candles.

“It’s a beauty.”

“It’s a beauty, nah?” a scratchy voice declared, speaking perfect Hebrew, and Eliezer nearly lost the little heart function remaining to him.

From the base of the menorah rose a strange, twisted little man, his beard a fluttering fan of streamers. He wore a loose robe tied with a series of rope belts, each a different shade—perhaps a different colour, although it was hard to tell. Despite the darkness, his eyes shone with a light that appeared to come, most disturbingly, from within. Again, and even more forcibly, Melech counselled retreat. He loathed the odd, especially the humanly odd.

“And who might you be?” Eliezer asked, ignoring Melech’s cowardly advice. Melech pawed the ground in high annoyance, crumbling some sizable grit.

“A keeper of the flame, maybe?” the old man said. “Someone you should talk to with respect.” The keeper aimed a gaunt forefinger at Eliezer. “Look up!”

“All right, my old friend.” *Older than me*, Eliezer thought with wonder, and Melech nodded mischievously: *that would be a wonder, indeed.*

Eliezer raised his eyes to the single blazing candle. "And what am I seeing?"

"Fire!"

"Thank you for the infor—"

"Distant fire! No chance to move its cursed weight, not with these spindly arms!"

"Ah!" Now it was clear; he needed help to light his menorah during the eight days of Chanukah.

"During the eight days of Chanukah, nah? Representatives."

"Yes, of the eight days that the oil—"

"Of the eight days of Creation!" The old man stood motionlessly, finger pointing (so rudely!) at Eliezer's eyes.

"Forgive my presumption for saying so, my old"—*old*—"friend, but perhaps you are not fully familiar with the Holy Word. For there were seven days of creation. Well, to be exact six—"

"Eight!" the old man interrupted him again. "Six days of Adonai's labour, one of rest, one of creation every day."

"All right," Eliezer said slowly, soothingly. "Eight." And indeed it was true that in some branches of mystical thought there was talk of eight days, physical and spiritual. Yet this ancient soul looked like no scholar.

"Rest, nah?"

That was certainly the proper exchange. "Perhaps you have heard of me, then," Eliezer said. "Ever since I transgressed the proper boundaries of knowledge" (*forgive me, already!*) "my curse has been to wander the world, assisting all who seek my help with the magic I learned. And in return, I ask only room and board."

"It's a curse to do *mitzvahs*?" He'd echoed Eliezer's earlier thoughts so closely, it was uncanny. Very uncanny.

"If it's done under duress."

"God does not 'duress'!"

Little do you know, Eliezer thought. Melech seemed in no mood to take a position one way or another.

The old, old man said, "Sounds like punishment to me."

"If you say so."

"So it was your choice, nah? You chose to go where you weren't supposed to? And so, the consequences: doing good."

The keeper had offered him rest, but there was no shelter any-

where in sight, and as thin as the old, old man was, there appeared to be no food anywhere nearby, either. Melech responded to these obvious observations with an obvious plan: *leave*.

Be nice, Melech, Eliezer “whispered”; he’s mad.

The horse merely stated that that was precisely his point.

“The ground is warm,” the keeper said. “Lie and eat.”

Eliezer moved to where the keeper pointed: a patch of ground that seemed lighter in colour than the surrounding sand. Sure enough, it radiated heat, making blankets and a tent perhaps unnecessary. But as for food—

“As for food,” the old, old man said, “manna!”

Oy, Eliezer thought. This was real trouble. Yet some of the sand wasn’t sand; smooth-surfaced mounds rose from the dirt like bubbles. Eliezer picked up a beige bubble and raised it to his lips. Melech declared that now Eliezer was the mad one, but Eliezer tongued the opaque bubble and found himself utterly smitten. It was the sweetest delight he’d ever tasted! He knew the taste but could not place it: creamy and sweet. He ate an entire bubble, which was full of air and substance all at once. His stomach sang songs of praise.

“No *brochah*?” the keeper asked. “A gentile?”

“Forgive me.” Then Eliezer chanted the blessing of thanks for the food. *Baruch atoh Adonai elohaynu*. Blessed art thou, O Lord our God. *Melech ha’olam*. King of the Universe.

“King of all!” And the keeper pointed up, at Heaven or the candle, it wasn’t clear.

When the blessing was done, Eliezer said, “So, you want me to light your other candles for you. Just one problem, my old friend.”

“Where are the other candles, nah?” The keeper laughed. “Where are the other candles? See the light!” Then the old man disappeared, sinking away into the base of the menorah as if he’d melted into it.

“I guess that means wait till morning. What do you think?”

But as he turned to face Melech, he noticed the horse had fallen asleep, a light coating of bubble painting his equine lips.

“So be it.” Eliezer lay on the warm ground, wrapping himself in the glow and instantly dropping off.

• • •

“Come on!”

Once again, Eliezer nearly jumped out of his skin, this time from a position still deep inside sleep. He opened his bleary eyes to see the keeper standing over him, face in full shadow as the sun glared beyond his head. “Oy,” Eliezer commented, “you.”

“Tonight’s the first night!”

“I know.” Eliezer lifted himself off the ground and began to brush the sand from his clothing, as slowly as he could in order to annoy the old, old man. Surprisingly, his joints didn’t raise their usual litany of complaints; the warmth of the ground must have done them good. Above, the lone candle in the menorah raised aloft its steady flame, and there was no sign that the candle had shrunk to any degree. Eliezer made the keeper watch as, with exaggerated care, he gathered his robes around him. “You’ll excuse me.” He went behind a distant rock to relieve himself; along the way, he spotted Melech in the distance, munching on a patch of something.

“Bubble?” he asked the horse, half-verbally.

Melech horse-nodded and kept on going. What *was* that flavour?

“You finished?” came the harsh voice of the keeper.

“It is not permitted to interfere with the functions of the body!”

Eliezer called back. *Does the man know none of the Laws?* A sorry soul.

“You must begin!”

“I’ll begin when I’m finished.” That was a truly Kabbalistic paradox—maybe he was going to manage this after all, if his head was working so well. Except for that one insoluble problem. He returned to the menorah to find the keeper standing with arms crossed, one hand fingering the end of a rope belt.

“*Nu?*” the keeper asked with an impatient lilt.

Eliezer drew himself to his maximum height. “My old friend,” he began, “I will help you as far as I can. But I cannot perform miracles.” A half-truth—no more. “I cannot light candles that aren’t th—”

“Get them!”

“And where may I do that?” He had visions of entering into a life-long quest, across the desert sands and into oasis after oasis, village after village, just to find eight giant candles. “Is there a caravan loaded with eight-foot-tall candles coming through here soon? Do you know of a shop?”

The keeper leaned toward him, breaking into a manic grin as he

stuck his face in Eliezer's.

"Bees!"

Eliezer could only stare at him. Such madness was ludicrous and sad all at once. He stifled a sigh and calmed himself by licking his lips. That was when he noticed that he was neither thirsty nor—even more amazingly—hungry. Those bubbles....

The keeper straightened himself once more, then unwound one of his belts from his waist. He held the rope out to Eliezer. "A wick, nah?"

By now, Melech had come to witness the discussion, and muttered something offensive. *I won't listen to such talk*, Eliezer told him, *such beastly talk*. "Thank you. Thank you very much," he said as he took the rope, which turned out to be well over eight feet long. Where did it all come from? Yet the old man's waist was still encircled with other belts.

"Bees!" the keeper repeated, and laughed. He reached down to the base of the menorah, from which he never moved more than a few inches, and lifted a brown, well-glazed jug from somewhere below. "Nah!"

Eliezer took the jug from him and lifted the earthenware lid. Inside was a sweet white liquid. Nectar.

He understood now what the keeper wanted him to do, which was just as well, since the old man had disappeared. "Come on, Melech," he said, "let's build a candle."

Melech was now more certain than ever that Eliezer's own brains were addled, and felt it necessary to remind him that there were no bees in the desert.

"So who am I to argue?" Eliezer replied. Then, to himself, he muttered, "What bird, then, Melech?" He opened the jug once more and lowered the end of the rope into it; twirling the rope in its descent, he was able to immerse it entirely in the nectar. "An eagle? Perhaps an owl? Something with strong talons."

Melech made some facetious suggestions involving barnyard fowl; he seemed determined to be no help whatsoever. Eliezer shrugged and withdrew the soaking rope from the jug. It was now a feast for bees—the only problem was finding bees in a wasteland like this. Yet the old keeper seemed to know what he was about, so Eliezer decided he would simply exercise some faith. Faith....

"You don't think... that the old gentleman is... no!"

The Lord had His many avatars, perhaps, but none could be so patently absurd. The glowing fire that had spoken to Eliezer, telling him of his punishment, was somewhat more dignified than this old fool.

"Then again, go figure the Lord's ways! So: an eagle? Maybe a hawk." Just to be on the safe side; he was good at hawks. He spoke the letters of the word for hawk, repeating the word as many times as their numerical value. Now—though more slowly than ever before (he *was* getting old!)—came the metamorphosis. His arms became wings; his robes became, and his body sprouted, feathers; his mouth elongated to a beak: the usual story.

Grasping the dry end of the rope in his right talon—the one without arthritis—he flew up the front of the menorah. Saturated as it was with nectar, the rope was terribly heavy, and his every joint complained at the load. Looking below, he saw no sign of the keeper, just the gleaming gold base of the candelabra. Melech glanced up at him, then returned to nuzzling the ground, looking for more bubble. Food fit for a horse as well as a man: not bad. Careful to avoid the flame of the *shamas*, the servant candle, Eliezer flew over the rightmost candleholder and suspended the lower end of the rope into its very centre. So there was the wick; now he needed a candle to go around it! With a few words he'd learned from a rope-charmer, he stiffened the rope till it stood erect without assistance.

He wanted to ask Melech if he knew any bee-calls, but could easily imagine the sort of unpleasantly sarcastic answer the horse would make. He flew back down to the ground and began the metamorphosis once more, unable to resist stealing a look at the foolish wick that stood shiny with nectar, but otherwise naked, above the holder. Maybe Melech was right; maybe this was all sheer madness.

"Nice!"

The keeper stood below the candleholder with its towering wick, shielding his eyes from the sun.

"Adam Cadmon, human All: the jug and the crackpot and you are one, Eliezer ben-Avraham! Speak the voice, nah?"

"What are you, crazy?" The keeper wanted him to tap into the deepest part of Kabbalah, where all unity—as represented by the human figure Adam Cadmon—could be found, and call forth with the voice of the One. "You want me to spend all eternity...?" Well, in the

Jewish version of Hell (that terrible *goyische* concept): in the void. He'd already violated the boundaries of forbidden knowledge; he didn't need to press his luck any further.

"You won't be pressing your luck, nah? You'll be making light!"

"Stop reading my mi—"

"One with the light, and one with creation." Then the old, old man let out a shriek, a kind of yell that pierced Eliezer's ears and brain and reached down to his very core. It triggered Eliezer's own spirit, and almost without any effort on his part the cry went out to the world at large, at a level no one could hear but everyone and everything could feel. "Stop worrying," the keeper said. "Baby!"

A black dot appeared over the northern horizon; it grew into a cloud, a pitch-black cloud that wavered and roiled. The cloud expanded, and ahead of it as it approached came an answering call to the cry, a steady, heavy buzz. In seconds the bees swarmed them: Melech, Eliezer, the keeper, then the menorah, swallowing everything in a deafening, blinding mass. They poured through the air right up to the candleholder, and began to drink the nectar from the bottom up. In their wake, honey flowed off the holder into the desert; and as the swarm moved its way up the wick, a pale, translucent candle rose behind it, inch by inch. Eliezer watched as the bees jostled and swirled and danced their bee-dance.

"So, eat!"

Eliezer looked down and saw that the honey was generating bubbles in the sand. In the bosom of Mother Earth. Now he knew what the bubbles had reminded him of: milk and honey. He made eye contact with Melech, who gave him a pitying look. "So we're here," Eliezer called out, his voice barely above the din of the buzzing masses above. "We've made it home." Home: the most precious of words for a wanderer like himself. He'd meant it as a joke, but...he shook his head to clear the dreams away.

Yet he couldn't help thinking, or maybe just feeling, that this was a place he'd been to before, a starting point.

As the bees did their work, Eliezer sat and tucked into some of the bubble, enjoying it like a starving man. Was it addictive? All he knew was that he could not get enough of it, at least till his stomach groaned in dismay. *So?* he told his belly; *you've made me suffer enough over the years.*

"Do you know the story of Chanukah?" the keeper asked.

Eliezer rolled his eyes. "Such a question for an old man like me. Am I a five-year-old *putz*?"

Yet the keeper told him the story anyway, about the miracle of the lamp with oil enough for one day but that lasted for eight. By now the bees were high enough up the candle that the two men could speak without shouting. Eliezer nodded his head as the old, old man declared, "And so, in honour of God's miracle, we light a candle every night for eight nights, not far off the solstice!"

"Eh?" Well, that wasn't the usual ending to the story. But it seemed that the keeper was finally silent, and Eliezer said, "*Mazel tov*; you know your festivals. You must be very proud."

"And the circle is complete, nah?"

"So, you talk in riddles, is that it? And I'm supposed to figure out what you're talking about. Fine, I'll play your game. Later." It was time for a nap. At the rate they were going, the bees would be working for another couple of hours turning nectar into beeswax, and he could take a little snooze.

"Games? You want games? Spinning in circles?" From somewhere in his robes the old, old man extracted a gold dreidel. On the nearest side, the raised letter "shin" was intricately carved.

"All right; I get the picture. You're a wise fool. But a wise fool is supposed to be *wise*!"

To Eliezer's dismay, the keeper bent down and, with a flick of its stem between thumb and forefinger, spun the dreidel a couple of inches above the ground. So now they were going to play children's games? The point of the dreidel touched down on the desert and stood rock-solid, its four flat sides blurred into a perfect cylinder like that of the rising candle. The stem's position was so steady, and its rotation so fast, it seemed motionless. And what would they use as counters, to be won or lost depending on how the dreidel fell? He tried to remember what the four letters on the sides of the dreidel represented.

"A great miracle happened there'!" the old, old man cried.

"I know that!" As if he needed such lessons! "In the *game*!" One letter meant you won the pot, another meant you put something in...Melech expressed astonishment that Eliezer would even consider becoming involved in such silliness, but Eliezer needed to keep the keeper happy and calm. Who knew what craziness lurked within?

Eliezer waited impatiently to see which side the dreidel would land

on. But it didn't slow down at all; it maintained its momentum far beyond what would be reasonably expected, and even began to create its own miniature tornado as it drew desert sand into its tiny vortex.

"Nah! Always turning!"

So that's how it was. Not only did the dreidel carry upon it the four initial letters of that phrase in honour of the holiday, it also symbolized the passage of time. Everything the keeper said was a riddle—like Kabbalah itself. Eliezer stretched himself out on the deliciously warm ground. The days were nearly as short as they would ever be, but the sun here was every bit as bright as during the height of summer—yet the heat of the sand radiated from within, not above. He could watch in comfort as the candle stretched toward the sky behind the black and gold swarm, as the dreidel spun at the foot of the menorah. At times the hypnotic spin of one and buzz of the other made him doze off, but he snapped awake again, fearful he would miss something. The keeper did his disappearing act once more, and Melech was silent, preferring to keep his opinions to himself for a change.

• • •

Toward evening, the bees completed their work; they reached the dry top of the wick, and with nothing more to eat they rose *en masse* and returned to their distant home somewhere in the north. So now a second huge candle stood in the menorah, but unlit. One was supposed to light the eight candles of Chanukah with the servant (thus its name), but how was he to move that wax-and-flame giant? His arms were not that much less "spindly" than the keeper's.

"Nah! Good work!"

Eliezer's heart recovered from its flip. "Oy, do you have to sneak up on people?" He gestured at the new candle. "Thank you for the compliment, anyw—"

"I was talking about the bees." The keeper seemed to be trying to align the candles with his bony hands, as if measuring them for some great portrait or act of engineering. As if he was going to be the one doing the work! "Now you have to light it."

"Yes, thank you for the information. But how?"

"With the king!"

"You mean the servant. A servant isn't a king." The old, old man

knew nothing, yet kept trying to teach Eliezer about Chanukah!

"The source of light is the king!"

"If you say so." Melech did the horse equivalent of a roll of the eyes. "But," Eliezer repeated, hoping for some greater clarity, "how?"

"You are the spark, nah?"

Thank you again, Eliezer said, in as sarcastic a mental tone as possible. He hoped that the old, old man could indeed read his mind. "Perhaps you can offer more practical advice?"

"Let there be light!" the keeper cried. "You have the spark. Every day: the eighth day."

"Ah! So every day is a new creation, like an eighth day, yes?" No answer. "And the 'spark'?" Maybe life itself. Every day there is life, the world is born anew. "You see, Melech? It all makes sense, in a way."

Melech was not so sure.

"One question, my ancient friend. You're the keeper; why don't you have this 'spark'?"

"I never said I was 'the' keeper."

Melech, with his better memory, confirmed it. In Hebrew there is no indefinite article, only the definite. And the old, old man had not said, "*Ha*" to denote "the" when he identified himself. So what was the significance of that?

"You're a keeper, too," the old, old man continued.

Melech neighed, right out loud, manifesting some sort of worry he could not specify.

"Make some fire, wizard! You have the spark, you are the spark!"

Life: that was what Eliezer had, and maybe the Keeper didn't, or no longer had in sufficient amount to light the flame. Life: the candles themselves were symbols of that fire. Light symbolized life, and the extra, ever-burning candle—the one normally called the servant—represented the King giving that light and life to the others. "As only the Lord can create life, so only the king candle can provide the spark for all the others." *Melech ha'olam*.

"You see, Melech?" he said to his coincidentally named horse. "It all fits." *And what are you so afraid of, silly one?*

But Melech couldn't answer, because he was still trying to work out what was bothering him, what made him want to run. Eliezer could not afford to be so cynical, so skeptical. He had to do what he'd been asked to do.

And what he'd been asked to do was a great honour: Eliezer was the means to bring light unto the darkening world. As the winter solstice approached, and night reached its greatest power, this menorah would light the darkness, and call Light back to the world. "Chanukah, Melech: the Festival of Lights."

"So get busy!" Keeper said. "The night falls!"

"All right! Be patient!"

At that point Melech cried out into Eliezer's mind. A keeper. Did that mean there would be another?

Oy.

"So that's it," Eliezer said to Keeper. "I'm to be your successor? Nah?" And he would spend eternity, or a good portion of it, stuck here in the desert lighting candles. "What did you do last year on Chanukah? How did you manage? Was it you then? Were you the lighter of the candles? And now you're weak, and you want to find someone to take your place. If I—"

Keeper burst out laughing, so raucously that Eliezer couldn't hear himself think. The old, old man doubled up, slapped his knees and stomach. At last, the laugh gradually subsided, but then he looked at Eliezer again and started laughing even harder, if that was possible. He wagged his bony fingers at Eliezer, opened his eyes wide, and appeared to be trying to say something, but couldn't get it out. Eliezer crossed his arms and waited patiently for the old, old fool to finish. *Thank you for the warning*, Eliezer said to Melech in the meantime. *We were almost permanent residents of this place*. Although, with all the wandering he'd done, the idea of a home did have its appeal....

Keeper did his eyes-wide, wagging-fingers nonsense again, but this time was in sufficient self-control to finish the thought. He twisted his face into a mock-monstrous expression, and said, "Boogoo boogoo!" That just set him off again. It was getting very tiresome. "Boogoo boogoo!"

Melech suggested they leave immediately, but Eliezer could not, for a variety of reasons. Did his punishment mean that he would have to help Keeper even if it meant his own imprisonment in a task of no definable duration? How could he help others if he was stuck here, attached to the menorah like this fool till his flesh melted away and his own fingers were as skeletal as these?

"Conspiracies!" Keeper cried, in a bogeyman's voice. "Plots and

conspiracies!" And, accompanied by yet more waggling. "Boogoo boogoo!"

"Explain yourself or I will go on my way." It was an empty threat, but—

"An empty threat, Eliezer ben-Avraham." Then Keeper finally became serious, or something approaching it. "You think I'm the only keeper? Or you are? Who do you think you are, nah?"

"So all living things have it. The spark."

"All living things have it. All are the flame. You can help the most."

"Who helped you last year?" An answer to that would be a help. "Who lit your candles on Chanukah?"

"I was a younger man then. Not so close to the dark."

"To the dark," Eliezer repeated. The solstice. Because he was so close to the solstice he was older and weaker. Was that it? Melech was still skeptical, but Eliezer decided something: he had no choice, either because of God's punishment that required him to do such *mitzvahs*, or because he would not call Keeper a liar without proof, or because, quite simply, it was a *mitzvah*. A good deed.

And because he had to have faith, or he might as well be in darkness forever.

"Fine, my ancient friend. No more talk of plots and conspiracies." He turned to Melech. "So, any thoughts?"

Melech came up with an intriguing suggestion: a phoenix.

"A mythical creature? And not even one of ours?" Eliezer thought about it a moment. "Certainly appropriate, but I'm not sure I can do that. I can't create life, but can I create a non-life?" Too absurd.

"I like the phoenix!" Keeper declared.

"So shall it be."

Eliezer could imitate life's many forms using the life within himself, but had only a hazy idea of what a phoenix might look like. He transformed himself into a large red bird. The sun set just as his metamorphosis was complete, and he glowed in the final golden rays of dusk. He flew up to the king candle, and felt no heat, no burning pain, as he lowered himself into the heart of its flame. Its fire touched the fire inside him, joining with his very soul and spark. He rose once more, all aflame but not burning, and prepared to land—to *alight*—on the candle representing the first night of Chanukah.

"What, again no *brochah*?" Keeper called up from below. "Do you

know nothing?”

In his mind Eliezer began the words of the blessing, and he was joined in his recitation by Keeper’s voice and the “voice” of Melech, too, who seemed to enjoy the opportunity to participate in a religious ceremony for a change. So what if he had no soul?

Baruch atoh Adonai elohaynu...

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God...

Melech ha’olam.

King of the universe.

And they recited the blessing till the very end:

Vetzivanu l’hadlik nehr shel Chanukah.

And commanded us to light the Chanukah candle.

Eliezer flew onto the other candle and clutched the wick in his talons; it caught the flame with enthusiasm. As he lifted himself into the air again, Eliezer noted that the fire stayed behind; he was as free of flames as the two who waited for him below. He descended and reversed the transformation. When he was done, he rubbed a new ache in his back as they all recited the other two blessings for the first night, then said as one, “*Omain!*”

Keeper followed with a final, satisfied, “Nah!”



The candles burned all night, and all the next day, with no discernible shortening. The wax simply refused to melt. It was a miracle... or something close to it. Even after a long, rich night’s sleep—uninterrupted by his bladder! a real miracle—he found them still burning, still the same size.

And still the dreidel spun.

And so, for seven more days and seven more nights, Eliezer repeated the procedure. Keeper would hand him another rope belt and jug of nectar, the bees came to do their duty, and Eliezer lit the new candle. On the eighth night was the solstice, but at the darkest time of the year the desert glowed with blazing light from nine giant, stubborn, never-say-die candles. Now that all were finally lit, the golden menorah shone like something God himself must have fashioned.

“Maybe this is what the Lord uses to see in the dark, eh?” Eliezer joked to Melech, who cautioned him against blasphemy. “Come, don’t

take everything so seriously.”

“You may go!”

Keeper was waving his hand sharply, as if wantonly dismissing them. Or perhaps he was trying to prove that they were free, that they would not be held captive here. Melech’s paranoia had never completely dissipated, but he was calm enough not to need such reassurance. Eliezer turned briefly toward the horse to flash him a look signalling that a little faith was not a bad thing, even in an animal.

“Keeper—” But the old, old man was just now disappearing into the base of the menorah. Did he sleep under it? Was he part of it? While looking at the ground, Eliezer noticed some bubbles rising to the surface. “Well, no reason we can’t stay till morning, no? After all, we’re entitled to another night’s room and board, even in the absence of a room.”

Melech hesitated to agree, but then nuzzled one of the bubbles at his feet and gave in.

The next morning there was no sign of Keeper. The sun was peeking over the eastern horizon. Eliezer looked up at the menorah, and saw what he should have expected to see: only the king candle remained standing and ablaze. Thin trails of smoke rose from where the other eight had stood. There was not a sign of melted wax or charred rope. But that one flame never wavered, never flickered, never dimmed, even in the sun’s glow.

“Good magic, my friend,” Eliezer commented.

Melech nodded and urged him to get ready to leave. The horse always wanted to go on, find someplace more comfortable. What could be more comfortable than here? But he knew better than to expect he could stay. Keeper could—was obliged to—remain here forever; Eliezer’s role was quite the opposite. Melech made a vague, and predictable, comment about mirror-images, even hinting at a physical resemblance between them.

“God forbid, Melech.”

Eliezer’s eye was caught by a glimmer on the ground. The dreidel had landed at last, and the letter that stood on the topmost side was the “Nes”: the initial letter of the word “miracle.”

After a brief visit to the other side of that boulder, he mounted Melech and rode toward the rising sun. As Melech’s feet clopped on the ground, Eliezer thought he heard the old, old man’s “Nah!”

coming from behind him. Oddly, it also sounded like a baby's cry, a "Wah!"

"Maybe we're all going in circles," Eliezer said. Melech had no reply. "What if we come here every year, and don't even know it afterward? Hmm? Maybe we forget, and come and light the candles all over again."

Melech now made a poor joke about being in the dark when it came to such questions.

"Shame on you," said Eliezer. •

Thanksgiving

Claire Litton

you devour me from the inside

my bones are old soup spoons and
you sip my thoughts from them
dainty with your little finger held
just so

when i first realized
i was turning into your buffet
your rattling dim sum cart
with lotus-scented bamboo baskets

i couldn't help thinking
what you might taste like yourself
melting across my lips and thighs
your cinnamon texture alive in my fingertips

who eats who around here?

when your jaws are tired of munching
my carcass lacy with tooth marks
i'll sit like a burgeoning peach pie

waiting for the knife •

The federal bureaucracy provided endless fodder for farce—it was a four-hour ordeal just to requisition staples.

A Day Without Kings

Adam La Rusic

Everyone agreed that things had really come unglued when Hobie Sanderson was inaugurated as the 62nd President of the United States. It wasn't that Hobie was evil, or radical, or cowardly. *Au contraire*. By most accounts, Hobie was a super guy. He just wasn't that bright, that's all.

Still, when being President was about as popular as a kick in the ass with a frozen gum boot, you took what you could get. And that's the way things had been, ever since the Zapper.

I worked for the White House. Not *in* the White House, by any means, but *for* the White House. I was so far down on the totem pole I got vertigo trying to see the top, and my improbably long title had the word "assistant" in it twice. But the job was a coup for a young guy like me, especially for an Alberta boy.

I hadn't actually been hired by the Hobie Sanderson administration (if you were to go so far as to call Hobie's band of befuddled inebriates an "administration"). I'd been brought in to serve Abraham Kennedy, a full six months and fourteen presidents ago.

...

Things had been going swimmingly in 2026, when Abe Kennedy surfed into office on a crest of exuberant nationalism. America was losing its deficits and winning its wars. We were, according to all official reports, free – free from tobacco, free from alcohol, free from pornography and free from trans-fats. If we were any more free, you'd have had to slap a pair of cuffs on us.

As President Kennedy took his oath, I was ushered into my new "office," stunningly outfitted in Anonymous Government Cubicle motif. Cutbacks to the civil service were such that even the staples for the communal stapler were carefully rationed.

Part of my job was writing policy positions for more senior administration officials on the less worthy events that transpired on a daily basis. From pork belly futures to obscure amendments to Botswanian tax law, all the truly insignificant happenings of the globe were shunted to my inbox.

I liked it. Here I was actually developing official government policy (subject to approval by thirty or forty operatives on the way up, of course). Instead of railing against the oppressive bureaucracy as most of my colleagues did, I just laughed. The federal bureaucracy provided endless fodder for farce—it was a four-hour ordeal just to requisition staples.

A couple of weeks into the job, I was asked to develop a position on an incident in New Mozambique. The brutality of a certain tin pot dictator there by the name of Colonel Smiley Ukufa was so outrageous as to draw the attention of the whole world to his little sliver of Hell, at least on a slow news day.

The media, when its fickle eye flitted that way, showed panoramic shots of sprawling, festering refugee camps that only served to cheapen the untold individual suffering. Meanwhile, the Colonel smiled from a balcony in his bone-white palace. Business as usual for that dark continent.

But this time was different. This time the Colonel keeled over stone dead in front of a stunned crowd. His personal guard was quick to carry him off, but it was caught on camera. For no apparent reason, in mid-sentence, his knees buckled and he collapsed, dead before he hit the floor (and from there, I hope, proceeded directly to his reserved seat in the Ninth Pit).

In cases such as this, the policy position would typically be low-key:

a statement calling for a peaceful transition and the hope for democracy. No one was upset to see him go, but it was simply not considered politic to say so publicly.

I contacted our intelligence in New Mozambique, but they were as mystified as anyone else. All in all, it was an odd happenstance. Still, stranger things have occurred.

Over the weekend, however, the world was rid of at least three more assorted tyrants, similarly dispatched. Nobody knew what was going on, not that anyone was complaining much.

Until the next day.

• • •

It was a fine Monday morning in Washington. The air was brisk and snappy, the sun was bright and I had a meeting with Reginald Dowager III, Acting National Sub-Director of the Foreign Policy Assessment Services Division, and his coterie. It seems that all this business of dictators dropping dead had caught the attention of the higher-ups. I'd been graced with the opportunity to attend a meeting in the White House, by virtue of having handled the Smiley file. Things were looking up. Maybe I'd even garner enough pull to get those staples I'd been waiting for.

In my experience, anyone with "the third" after his name was likely to be a pompous buffoon with an ability to speak almost entirely through his nose. Such types normally didn't have too much time for the likes of me, a yokel from one of the new states. But the meeting would provide me the chance to impress some of the bigwigs, if I could keep a lid on my cynicism for all of two hours. As an added bonus, President Kennedy was addressing the press just before my meeting, so it was an opportunity to see the big guy in person.

Three retinal scans and a cavity search later, I had my security pass and was sitting on an uncomfortable fold-up chair at the back of the Press Briefing Room.

After a brief introduction by a lackey, who made it clear that only softballs were to be lobbed from the press corps, the man himself entered.

President Kennedy was the definition of dashing. Dash was prerequisite for the job these days, along with a résumé of starring roles in

Hollywood action movies. He wasn't related to the other President Kennedy, but the political handlers had found that names reminiscent of illustrious leaders past lent an edge on voting day. All the candidates were doing it.

"Ladies and Gentlemen...and reporters," he said suavely, to an obligatory chuckle across the room. "I'm here today to talk about Freedom." He said it with the capital *F*. "It is my primary goal to keep the public fully engaged. I'm here today to tell you the good news about the United States' cooperative annexation of Chile and Peru."

There had been some uncomfortable incidents recently involving either "terrorist sympathizers" or "peasants" (depending upon whom was asked) and American peacekeepers. A couple of newspapers that refused to drink the Kool-Aid were wondering aloud why it was necessary to overthrow a democracy in order to establish a democracy. But the political pendulum of the nation was pretty far right at the time, and no one had much time for liberal whiners.

"My Fellow Americans," he continued in a stentorian voice, "we join the freedom lovers of Chile and Peru who seek to unyoke themselves from the tyranny of the majority. This is a struggle against Evil and we are Good. Citizens of America, we must seek out those among us who would use democracy to pervert the cause of democracy—"

And then he dropped. Dead, as it turned out.

The secret service had him out of the room at lightning speed, just as my brain was starting to register that something untoward had occurred. Security blocked all the exits for a couple of hours, during which we were told nothing. My staff security pass got me out of the interrogations, thank God. I was, however, whisked away by a couple of serious-looking gentlemen to meet with the Secret Service because of my knowledge of the Smiley file. Suddenly I was the expert, I was *the* guy.

While the country reeled and stock markets crashed, I sat at an obsidian table in the White House Crisis Room. There was enough top brass seated there to finish an Irish pub—generals, admirals, directors. To my amazement, I could think of no supercilious wisecracks. Cynicism is the vanity of the impotent; these people didn't need it. The room reeked of power.

Major General Whitman Overdrive, Special Commander of the United Armed Forces and Chairman of the Global Alliance, launched

the meeting. The General was a short, barrel-chested man with bristly steel-gray hair and a heroically wrinkled face.

"It's my sorry duty to inform you," said the General, "that the President is dead. The cause of death is not known at this time. The Vice President is being sworn in at Los Alamos. What I need to know—and I need to know *now*—is what in thunderin' tarnation is going on around here. You—Hutch—is this related to that Smiley business?"

Hutch, I suddenly remembered, was me.

"Uh, yes sir." I cleared my throat. "Intelligence in New Mozambique talked to Colonel Smiley's physician—he's with us—who suspected a massive embolism." My voice sounded small in the room. "Cultural practice in the area forbids autopsy, but he did report that the Colonel's eyes—whites, iris and pupil—were orange. He considered this a medical anomaly bordering on the bizarre. A camera shot of Exalted Chairman Ming the Merciful also showed a definite orangening of the eyes as he fell. In all cases the usual suspects were rounded up and subject to... uh... intense interrogation, but to date no information of any value has been obtained."

Secret Service Superintendent Sly Slithers spoke:

"Confirmed, General, that bodyguards reported the President's body had orange eyes."

"We're dealing with an unknown weapon," said Overdrive, "One that appears capable of targeting individuals anywhere on the planet. That could include the people in this room. Gentlemen, this is more dangerous than the atomic bomb."

Yeah, I thought, because now it's *your* coconut in the cross hairs. Rats! The cynicism was back.

• • •

I was made a member of the investigative team, a welcome diversion from my quest for staples. Tracking the source turned out to be surprisingly easy. We surmised early that an ideal candidate for a weapon of this pinpoint accuracy and global reach would be a satellite. From there it was a matter of analyzing an inventory of satellites and determining a short-list of candidates that were in the right place and the right time. Bingo.

A couple of weeks prior, a Silicon Valley company had launched

a constellation of new communications satellites. A brilliant young engineer working on the satellites, David Halsom, had snuck a little something extra on board each unit: namely, a Zapper. Techno-talk aside, what it did was turn a brain to jelly instantly. And when Halsom hacked his way in to the satellites' control modules through a wormhole he'd designed into the system, he could aim his little nasty to within one square foot of a target just about anywhere on the planet.

Fortunately, due to Halsom's subversive tendencies—he was a vegan, and had been known to read Burroughs (William, not Edgar Rice)—he'd been placed on various Watch Lists. In a quiet but massive police operation, the soft-spoken whiz kid was led from his home near San Francisco, his hands cuffed behind him, looking serenely at the media frenzy all about.

Overdrive, Slithers and myself were in Frisco to witness the interrogation from behind one-way glass.

"Throughout history, the rich and the powerful of this world have sacrificed the innocents and added to the sum of human misery for their own petty ambitions," Halsom said. "Removing the point source of suffering is simply the most efficient way of dealing with it."

"The man is obviously a nut bar," said Overdrive.

"If I may, sir, a trial would not be in the interests of national security," said Slithers. "Spreading this kind of insanity will simply destabilize the situation further."

It was agreed that the best thing to do was simply remove the threat with as little fuss as possible. David Halsom was spirited away, his fate "Classified." And the secret of the Zapper was now where it belonged—safe in the hands of US Military Intelligence.

Or so we thought.

• • •

The day after Halsom was disappeared, an obscure website popped up providing detailed specifications for all aspects of the Zapper. The site was hit several hundred times before security forces could shut it down, and intelligence services could only watch helplessly as the specs were promulgated globally over the next few days. The genie was out of the bottle, the worms were out of the can and the cat was most assuredly out of the bag.

It was time for another meeting at the obsidian table. The reek of power was now mingled with the merest soupçon of something else—could it be fear?

“Easy for you to say, Slithers,” said Overdrive as I entered the room. “No one has a clue who you are.” Major-General Overdrive had a wrinkle in his jacket and his rows of medals were slightly askew. “Ah, yes, Hutch,” he said turning to me. “Status report.”

“Any organization with a bit of nanocircuitry know-how, and the infrastructure to launch a satellite, can put up a Zapper,” I said. “That is, practically every nation, and quite a few multinational corporations, could—and probably will—have one of these up in a matter of days.”

“Right. Then we need a hundred. No, a thousand. Jesus Jiminy Cricket, we need as many as we can get up there,” Overdrive blustered.

Sitting next to me was Professor Belinda Balustrade, Scientific Advisor to the President. She was known for her ubiquitous lab coat and preternatural acuity. Overdrive’s next question was directed at her.

“What have you eggheads got for me? Is there any way to stop this thing?”

“None that we’ve found, sir. The beam seems to have an almost neutrino-like property. There is no material we could find that would stop it.”

“Neutrino? What in Sam Hill is a neutrino?” demanded Overdrive, leaning his frame forward, knuckles on the table. It occurred to me, given the puce hue of the General’s face, that he may be predisposed to blood-pressure issues. His entire head could supernova at any moment.

“A subatomic particle, sir,” Balustrade explained. “It passes through matter easily. Even a lead wall thousands of miles thick wouldn’t stop one. The mechanism is actually quite ingenious. The—”

“Spare me the gobbledygook, Balustrade,” said Overdrive. “Is there any way to hide from it?”

“Doubtful, sir,” continued Balustrade. “These days, all satellites are equipped with multi-spectral scanners of high-resolution capability and intelligent-analysis software. Combine this with real-time access to millions of easily accessible ID chips, ethercams and personal satcoms and the only way to hide would be to live in a hole in the ground.”

“Well Jesus in a jumped-up Jalopy, don’t that just beat all,” said the general, philosophically. “Okay, Balustrade, get to work on a hand-

held version of this thing, would you? In the meantime, my team are just going to have to figure out a way to knock these varmints out of the sky. Anything else?"

"Yes, sir," I said feebly. "Sorry to trouble you, sir, but could you sign my staple requisition?"

• • •

A few days later, Vice-President *cum* President John F. Washington proclaimed, from a secret location, that the US would take unilateral military measures against any nation launching any kind of satellite. The president's secret location was apparently not secret enough. He dropped dead half way through his announcement.

Obsidian table. The reek of power was now completely gone, replaced by the reek of a room that had not seen a cleaner for a couple of weeks. Overdrive was looking decidedly disheveled and his steely glare had been replaced by the furtive glances he shot around the room as he spoke. Slithers had been Zapped along with three more presidents. I'd been promoted to Assistant Special Advisor to the President. I had insisted on the "Assistant" part, to stay below the radar of the Zappers. It simply didn't do to distinguish oneself these days.

"...the entire High Command of the People's Empire of China, and forty-six other national leaders, revolutionaries, journalists and major league coaches," I said. "And Mr. Slithers, of course. All Zapped. We estimate that virtually every nation and global conglomerate now have satellites with Zapper technology. Basically, every world leader has veto power over the life of all the others. On the other hand, millions of troops have been called home, genocide and slavery have been abolished everywhere and war has pretty much stopped."

"Stopped? You can't just *stop* war. This is an outrage," said Overdrive. "Balustrade, what do you have?"

"No luck scaling up the weapon, sir. A Zap can only be initiated from above the ozone layer and pulsed for about a tenth of a second every forty hours. The mechanism is actually quite ingenious. The—"

"Spare me the gobbledygook, Balustrade," said Overdrive. "Secret Service?"

Reginald Dowager III was Slithers' replacement.

"We've had to engage in a domestic Zapping program," Dowager

said. "Strictly for national security reasons, of course."

"Who decides who goes on the domestic Zapping list?" I asked.

"Sorry, that's classified."

"Classified? What do you mean, 'classified'? Everyone in this room has full clearance."

"Well, one way to get on the list is to ask too many questions about classified information," said Reginald Dowager III.

"Oh," I said.

• • •

Politicians started to disappear faster than free donuts in the staff room. The lying glad-handers of the past were the first to go. Soon after them came—and went—the activists from the political fringes: the socialists, the Libertarians. Even the economists got a turn—a very *short* turn. When these were exhausted, the wing nuts followed: the Aryan Front, the Anarchists, the yogic flyers. All were summarily obliterated by persons unknown.

Eventually it got to the point when, despite the perks of being the most powerful person in the world, no one wanted the job of President of the United States. The ensuing confusion exacerbated my efforts to obtain staples and I was forced to resort to a binding technique involving elaborate origami and paper clips. God knows what I'd do if I ran out of paper clips.

The door to the White House stood open for two weeks before Hobie Sanderson, the tobacco-spitting rutabaga farmer from Mississippi, showed up on a drunken dare from his friends. He barely had time to inaugurate Buford "Call me Bubba" LeMay as Vice-President before they both disappeared on a three-day bender.

The advent of peace and the demise of dictators and politicians had its downside, however. Things ground to a halt, the centre would not hold. Good and Evil were felled and a new empire of Apathy reigned. Atlas shrugged. Economies collapsed. Law and order became sporadic, riots and vigilantism commonplace. Staples were simply out of the question. And as President Hobie Sanderson swilled beer and spilled nacho dip in the Lincoln bedroom, the frayed fabric of civilization unwound and a new Dark Age drew nigh.

Table. Overdrive had sent a proxy. No one had seen the General for weeks. The room had still not been cleaned, but the person who was supposed to be cleaning it, Ranjit Singh, was now head of the Secret Service.

As far as I could tell, I was the senior-ranking person in the entire government, which was not at all a comforting proposition with respect to my life expectancy. And the staple shortage was becoming a government-wide crisis.

Balustrade had called the meeting.

"We've done it," she said, "We've devised a shield against the Zapper. This apparatus, when placed on the head, creates a muon interference field in the void space above the cranium which effectively interferes with the neutrino-like particle utilized by the Zapper." Balustrade donned the head apparatus.

"You mean all you have to do is put on that high-tech tinfoil hat," I said.

"Well, it certainly isn't tinfoil," said Balustrade archly. "But, yes, all you have to do is put it on. This is a prototype, but within days we can start mass production. This should give us the opportunity to knock all of the Zappers out of the sky with impunity."

"Except for ours, of course," said Overdrive's lackey.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but we thought that, in the interests of humanity, it would be wise to simply eliminate all of the devices," said Balustrade.

"That's pinko talk," said Major-General Overdrive, striding into the room from behind a fake wall panel. He grabbed Balustrade's hat and put it on. The General had a scraggly beard, dirt-streaked uniform and a particular pungency, as if he'd been living in a hole for some time. "Singh, is it? Singh, see to it that Ms. Balustrade and her little gang of eggheads remain guests of the state indefinitely under the Emergency Measures Order." Overdrive couldn't contain his glee with the tin foil hat. "We're in the catbird seat now, boys."

Unbeknownst to Overdrive, I'd surreptitiously pocketed an extra copy of the design specs for the tinfoil hat that Balustrade had left on the obsidian table. The next day I anonymously cast them to the world through the internet. That pretty much spelled the end of the Zappers.

Once they were gone, it didn't take long for the rulers to reemerge – cautiously at first, like cats walking on wet pavement; then more quickly, like vacationers returning to the beach after a summer squall. Over the weekend, fighting erupted in the Middle East and Muslims and Hindus clashed in India. China was talking tough with Taiwan and a mortar shell killed civilians in Antigua.

My days of controlling the fate of the world around the obsidian table were soon over, but I was homesick for my tiny cubicle. On Monday morning I tackled the staple issue with renewed aplomb. •

EDMONTON POETRY FESTIVAL

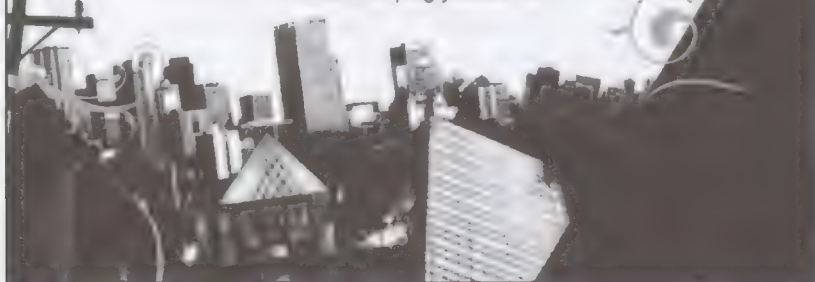
September 17-23, 2007

From the moment Edmonton Poetry Festival Week is declared at City Hall, people will be plugging into poems all across the city. Edmonton has been declared 2007 Cultural Capital of Canada. As a result there will be some special poetry activities. The **Honour Songs** project will celebrate Aboriginal women. **Poets Across Borders** will bring together different cultural groups to create poems. **Street from the Heart** will create video poems by at-risk kids. Poems from many languages performed at City Hall...

hip-hop electrifying the stage... dozens of poets in restaurants and coffee shops... a symposium at Grant MacEwan College...

poets connecting in classrooms. They'll be roaring, sighing, singing, honouring, dissing, discussing and dancing.

Come and plug yourself in!



Her eyes passed over them in a series of fits and starts. Every time she looked at them she felt dizzy.

Old People and Dogs: A Death in the Desert

Jennifer Rachel Baumer

The riders came out of the sky at dawn, free wheeling down to the pavement. The first rays of desert sun caught on black leather and smoked visors, black helmets and chrome bikes, and gleamed dully. For a minute the rip in the everything held and Cassie couldn't quite make out what it was she thought she saw there and then the sky healed and there were just the bikers, there as if they had always been.

She knew better. It's cold in the desert at night, no matter how hot the days, and she hadn't slept well, half awake with dreams about Sam and the others. Dreams she was afraid would come true, as some did. As the visions she sometimes had did. So, restless and awake, no doubt in her mind she'd have heard machines like those arrive. Not to mention she didn't doubt what she'd just seen. This was the desert. American west. Strange things happen out here because there's enough room for them to.

Cassie rubbed her eyes and stared anyway, because they were big beautiful bikes and the figures moving around them were big beautiful men unless she missed her guess. The first one pulled off his helmet then and proved her right. Rugged features, dark like the night, beard

and long hair bound into a braid, and he said something to the others. With the distance between them she couldn't hear what he said but she had no doubt what it was.

Fast look around. Coffee went over the campfire. Everything that was out jumbled together into her pack. She would have been taking off before much longer anyway. Mount up. There were five of them. Before the last was mounted she'd slipped a leg over her bike. Watched the lot of them U-turn and pass her, heading up the way she'd been going. A minute later the tarmac was rushing past her and the sage and rabbit brush was a blur and she didn't care where they were going as long as it was they and as long as it was going.

• • •

She'd taken 361 up through Hawthorne the night before and hooked into 50 just because it's the loneliest highway in the world and lonely suited her, with the summer stars and all that vast blackness. Started weaving about two a.m. around Stillwater and figured she'd pick up in the morning and head back to Dayton and the Little Bit Past It she was calling home. This morning with the sun behind them and the shadows long she figured it might take a little longer to get home than she'd anticipated and couldn't say as she cared. By now they knew she was back there and they weren't making any effort to ditch her and they weren't stopping to see what the hell she wanted. It was a beautiful morning and the road lay ahead of her like a promise.

Only an hour, half an hour out of Dayton. Looked like an easy ride. She had time to watch the foothills purple as morning came on and fade to soft brown. The guys in front of her rode in a V formation and her shadow kept trying to catch up. Wanted to get closer, really, because they had something on the backs of their bikes she couldn't quite make out. Looked like spears, for all the sense that made. Still made sense not to get too close. Girl out here on her own is still a girl out here on her own and that's even if she's got a close friend named Colt.

Just as the sun came fully over the hill—outside of Fallon and shy of Dayton—they stopped and it took her a good distance to figure out what to do. They knew she was following but hadn't exactly waved howdy, so did she pass them and never end up knowing what was what?

Or hang back and watch?

They knew she was there anyway. She pulled up alongside a clump of rabbit brush that was midsummer virulent and sat sneezing while the five of them grouped together and pulled something out of a knapsack. She couldn't make out what it was until it rose up in the leader's hands and flapped its wings. She jumped a little—how many guys drive around with a bird in their bags? Couldn't tell what kind but it didn't matter much because a couple seconds later it was dead and the riders were parading around with the thing held above their heads and blood dripping.

"What the hell."

She got off the bike and stood watching because they totally weren't paying attention to her. What they were doing was gathering scrub from the sides of the road and making a fire. While she watched they coaxed it to burn—in Cassie's experience fires only started when you didn't want them to—and one of them removed most of the feathers from the thing and floated them into the flames.

Weirdest thing she'd seen anyone do in a while and she was starting to think about maybe mounting up and going on but one of them started fanning the flames with more of the feathers. Smoke billowed upward and the sky blotted out, which was impossible, not that much smoke that fast, but that brand of impossible was unimportant a minute later when the woman's face started forming.

She was the most beautiful woman Cassie had ever seen, with big dark eyes and hair the color of golden desert sunsets.

She was also clearly enormous and appearing out of thin air. The riders all went down on one knee before her and she looked placidly from one to the next before she spoke. Cassie couldn't hear her—she'd stopped too far away—but her words were inside just the same. Some of them. As if Cassie heard her inside.

"Called you. Called me as well. It is an old battle, as yet unknown. This is only a piece of the whole. Accept the sacrifice."

The last thing Cassie heard was "Find the scholar" and something broke inside her. She'd been paralyzed a moment earlier, listening without understanding, and suddenly she was in motion again. Because these guys were headed almost exactly where she was and because there was only one scholar Cassie knew of. She was on her bike and on her way.

Couldn't figure out what they'd want with Sam. A good guy, closest thing to a classical scholar Cassie knew, always quoting some dead poet or another. Sam was at Iwo Jima and pretty much anything that was important to him he said with somebody else's words. A lot of things were important to him.

Cassie hit the road fast and it didn't feel the same. Suddenly she was running. Suddenly she was being chased and there was somebody she was afraid for. The asphalt under the bike felt all torn up and the road threw up rocks at her as she rode. She could hear the riders start up behind her. They'd overtake her in minutes. But the sound of the hogs disappeared and when she looked rearview there was no one behind her on the road.

So she looked forward again, and rode.

• • •

Funny what family is. Sometimes you don't know who they are until they're threatened.

• • •

She made good time. Pulled through Dayton without seeing any sheriffs or staties and out the other side, bounced across some dirt roads and there it was. Fontana Park, they call it, for no reason anyone can determine. The remnants of someone's futile dream. It stands poking up out of the desert like a testament to all those who call this land ugly. Dry. Desert. Sere. Brown. You have to understand the colors out here before you can see them, the sixteen shades of blue in the mountains, the camel's back brown of the foothills, the pale gray green elegance of sage. Fontana Park rises out of it, with crumpled sheet metal and weathered wood. It's a mobile home park, not attached to anything really but some cottonwood and poplar that have been there forever, following the river. Otherwise there's nothing there. Scraggly buildings. Trailers that look like they've somehow been in head-on collisions. Buildings that should have been condemned last century.

And people. It's deserted, Fontana Park. Officially. Not home to anyone. But there are a lot of people there who can feel the wind in

the wires and the sound morning makes, who can take the desert distances inside themselves and not get lost, and sometimes they find each other.

Sometimes they make a home.

• • •

She thought Sam would be waiting for her. He had an uncanny way of knowing when she was coming. Maybe he really just had the best ears in the world. He'd hear her bike and come out from the fancy stone walls that ring Fontana Park and she'd give him whatever she'd found in junk stores and antique shops along the road: tired coffee mugs with decals from Eastern Universities; a tiny folio of the *Iliad* and leather-bound miniatures of Shakespeare's plays from a curious tiny library that operated in the 1890's. Once a typewriter, no small thing to bring home on a bike. She thought it had to be the first typewriter ever made and Sam gave her a brief history of the age of print. He's like her father in some ways, how he listens and how he knows so many things. He says she knows the future and he has lived the past.

Sam wasn't out front waiting and there wasn't any sign of Pris or Vera or Ashley or any of the spill of dogs usually around with the half dozen or so plaid shirt squatters. Place looked deserted as hell, like she'd driven up to some other abandoned mobile home park except for the vehicles out front—Sam's ancient battered Mustang, and a white pickup that didn't have county plates but looked like it should have.

And the bikes.

• • •

Cassie stood for a minute, hands on hips and shadow-still the morning long, staring at those bikes. Because there was no way—no way in hell—they could have gotten there before she did. There aren't any other roads or any other ways back there. It's a dip in the road between Dayton and Anywhere Else, two miles off the main highway, and that's giving that ribbon more credit than it deserves.

The other thing that had her stopped was the spears. Because they *were* spears. Tall, long, poky weapons standing up on the backs of the

bikes she'd been following for the last couple hours.

"Cassie?"

Pris. Pris looks like Sally Struthers on a good day, and this wasn't it. She came rolling toward Cassie like a juggernaut and Cassie always had to stop herself from jumping out of the way, because she was never sure if Pris was going to get stopped on her own.

"Pris, hey, those bikes—" Cassie started and then stopped again, because one of the free standing buildings had opened up and people were beginning to spill out of it. She saw Sam step outside and away from her, moving back further into the park, and saw something that looked like the bikers, maybe, except her head was suddenly splitting and her vision blurry. Which was probably why she ran into the guy who was making a headlong dash for the county vehicle. Curly hair, gold wire-rim glasses, cheap brown suit that matched the dirt. He'd screwed his rabbit face up all worried and was making a dash for what was probably his vehicle when he clipped her and she stumbled and grabbed at him to keep her balance.

And let go fast. Because he was hot. Weirdly hot. Like he'd burned her hands or something hot, and even up close his face wouldn't take on a solidity but kept cycling in and out like she was seeing too many of him or like there were too many of him to be seen. Cassie shook her head, trying to clear it, and he made his escape. When she looked up again the bikers were there, all five of them, arrayed against a backdrop of abandoned mobile home park and empty desert, and they wouldn't stay in focus either. She put her hands over her face and took a breath and knew it was Sam as soon as he put a hand on her shoulder.

"Welcome home."

• • •

Sam gave her tea because he gave everybody tea. It didn't matter that outside morning was already trying to hit eighty degrees or that inside Sam's half-fire-gutted trailer it was easily ninety. He made her a cup of tea and she accepted it and wrapped her hands around it as if she were cold.

"Came here big as life, sweetie, and told us they're going to put a Neiman Marcus here and we had to go," Pris said. Her plump little hands carved elegant shopping malls in the air. Cassie considered for

a moment and then turned to Sam.

"What?"

"All progress is based upon a universal innate desire on the part of every organism to live beyond its income'," Sam said. "Samuel Butler."

Great. He was going to be a lot of help.

"It might be a Denny's," he added.

Cassie rubbed her head. Her hand smelled faintly of cheap after-shave where she'd warded off the fleeing rabbit. "Who was that guy?" she asked and then, "Who are they?" Because the riders had joined them. Tall and broad shouldered and dark. They carried swords at their sides and wore leather as though it were armor. Their eyes passed over Cassie without lingering. Her eyes passed over them in a series of fits and starts. Every time she looked at them she felt dizzy. Even more so when the leader knelt and kissed Sam's hand before they went back out.

Cassie stood still, staring. Sam watched them through the open door and Pris flipped through a *Cosmo* that was at least two years old. The bikes started up outside with a throaty roar and passed beyond hearing.

Cassie finally turned back to Sam. He was brewing more tea. She stuck her hands in her back pockets. "I found you a couple more plays," she said and tried to think past the buzzing in her brain. "*Troilus and Cressida* and *King Lear*."

Sam smiled at the tea. "How lovely. You know you don't have to do that."

"They're signed. First editions."

Finally he looked at her. "You're very funny," he said, dry and not bitter and Sam again. Before Cassie could say anything he went on. "Do you know what a lifestyle center is?" He nudged Pris who sat at the fixed table that jutted out of the wall. She squished over on the plastic seat to let him in.

"It sounds awful," she said. "What is it?"

Sam was reading *Cosmo* over Pris' shoulder. Probably a sex quiz. Or advice on how to choose the correct ink for your signature color. Sam would read anything. He didn't look up from the magazine but said softly, "They want to put in a shopping and dining center. Here. On this useless site. They're hoping for something like Neiman Marcus, you know, draw the tourist trade from the Lake. I'm sure they'll take

what they can get. WalMart. Shopko. Carrows. IHOP.”

Cassie’s head spun even with the bikers gone. “Here,” she said dully. “Here? Are they crazy?”

Sam rubbed his face and Pris looked up, angry. “They were from the economic authority, they said. They said there was nothing out here. Nothing but old people and dogs. They said they’ll have it and it will be a stop between the Lake and the metro areas and draw people from as far away as Bishop.” There were tears in her eyes. “Why would they want to do that?”

She looked at Cassie as if she truly thought Cassie could answer but it was Sam who said, “Progress, man’s distinctive mark alone’. Browning.”

Pris gave him a furious look that should have sent him running and said, “Oh, get up, you old thing – let me out.” She jiggled the trailer as she left and Sam didn’t say anything else, his eyes looking far into the past and away from the future he claimed was Cassie’s to see. There were tears in his eyes as well and Cassie panicked, set the mug of tea down blindly and said something she herself didn’t understand about unpacking or getting something ready and she got out of there but not quite in time. She heard him just before she got to the bottom step, soft and contemplative and sad: “Progress, man’s distinctive mark alone, not God’s, and not the beasts’; God is, they are, man partly is and wholly hopes to be.’ Robert Browning.”

And Cassie started to move away from the door but stopped when she heard him say one last thing: “A Death in the Desert.”

• • •

She fumed around her trailer for a little while, pretending she was coming up with a solution. Pretending she was thinking up ways to fight. But she was just angry, going over and over in her head how anyone could be so callous and self-centered as to look at Sam, at Pris, at the family dug out of desert clay, and say there was nothing there but old people and dogs.

She moved around the cramped space slinging her pack down, upending onto the bed—*campfire doused, and there are the riders but they have horses and chariots and spears*. Cassie shook her head, trying to clear it. This never did any good. And besides, it made no sense. But she saw

it anyway, the guy she'd run into, his long curly hair unbound and now he held a long bow in one hand and smelled of bay laurel.

"Stop it," Cassie said aloud. *Heat's got me. I didn't sleep well. That's all.*

And the riders and the guy from the economic authority, facing each other on the hard dirty ground outside Fontana Park, spears and shields and swords and blood, and behind them a horse, huge and unreal—

Sam interrupted before she saw anything more, before she finished fuming and stalking and seeing what she shouldn't be able to see. She hadn't finished trying to think yet, about the economic authority guy and the riders, because they were part of everything somehow, the riders and the other guy and—

Sam tapped on the side of the trailer and smiled through the open door. "I could use your help, Cassie."

She followed him down to the river, Sam carefully carrying a shoe box in front of him. Spring's mud was long gone and the ground cracked, dry hard and flaking. The grasses and trees were in the lush over-green stage just before they start to wilt and plan for autumn.

Sam didn't talk much and Cassie was afraid to say anything. Anger made her shuddery and tight; useless anger she couldn't do anything about made her cry. Sam took a look back over his shoulder and gave her half a smile. "'The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.' George Bernard Shaw." He didn't say anything for a minute or so after that and then said softly, "I wonder what that makes me?"

At the edge of the river Sam finally stopped and opened the box. When Cassie saw the dazed pigeon inside something started trying to click in her head.

She wasn't fully prepared for Sam to pull the pigeon from the Nike box and slit its tiny throat with a steak knife, but she wasn't totally surprised, either. As if she dreamed, she found herself starting to collect sage and dry leaves and to pile them near the shoe-box-turned-altar and when there was enough Sam dropped a match into the pile and added the bird feathers. The smell was dusty and scorched, like the time she'd caught a dish towel on fire on top of the stove. Smoke billowed skyward and Sam called quietly, "Great Athena," even as Cassie sank to her knees.

She looked kind and wise and terrifying, like every woman Cassie had ever known, her mother and grandmother, her best friends from high school. Her dark eyes held infinite sympathy and infinite anger. She was the woman Cassie had glimpsed on the side of the road, the bikers down on one knee before her, and now as then her heart pounded and spun and the world turned too fast and threatened to throw her off. Cassie gasped or made some small sound and, when the woman turned her attention to Cassie, Cassie went cold with her gaze.

The riders stood to the side of the smoldering fire and when her gaze finally lifted from Cassie it was to take them in and then she spoke. This time Cassie could hear her words. This time they were still inside, as well.

“Brave Hektor. Proud Paris. Warriors all.”

Cassie lost it then, vision sweeping through her and carrying her away. She stood on an ancient plain and heard battle cries and the sounds of swords and spears, the creak and rattle of chariot wheels. She could hear men shouting but not understand the language—that was Sam’s purview, after all, but Cassie understood the meaning and the ground was bathed in blood and the sweet sticky smell of the sacrificial fire called her back—

—to where the riders fought and everything shimmered, the sky out of focus and the businessmen there, strange and changed and unbound—

The vision snapped. She knelt on the river bank and retched but there was nothing inside of her.

Time had passed. The riders had gone. The battle was called.

Sam put one hand on her shoulder and when at last she raised her head he asked, “How does it end?”

Cassie could only shake her head. “I didn’t see that far.”

They stayed silent then, while the fire burned itself out.

• • •

They came the next day. Early. Breakfast was over, but not by much. They came in three vehicles, one county car, one sheriff’s Bronco and one Suburban almost bigger than Cassie’s trailer. There were five of them, the economic authority guy and two deputies and two more, who remained unidentified. They told everyone who they were but it didn’t stick. Nothing did. Cassie saw Pris and the others

looking at the invaders and looking away repeatedly, rubbing their eyes. Her head pounded, vision flexed. They were businessmen in denim and shirt sleeves, incapable of forgetting their ties; they were warriors in togas and leather armor. They were law enforcement in silly trooper hats and economic authority directors in stenciled baseball hats. They wore football-shaped helmets the sun glinted from.

Everyone was ordered off. They were told to go. They were told they had trespassed on land the county was taking over. They trod future retail sites with no intent to buy.

They were told to surrender and the sun bit violently off sword points and the riders were there, as Cassie had seen them. As she had somehow always seen them, she now thought, the flip side of the men they faced, expressions set and spears held ready.

"Wait," Cassie said and there was silence, no one moving, the air suspended around them, waiting for the break, the change, the charge. "Wait," she said and into that deathly silence her voice should have been heard, but she seemed to make no sound and when she spoke again she was drowned out by a cry that shook the trees and ripped apart time and sent everyone into flux.

"Cry havoc," Cassie thought, and then, "Shakespeare," because anything she couldn't identify was Shakespeare.

Two warriors came forward, Hektor and the man Cassie had run into. Stood facing each other, biker and executive, then Hektor facing his nemesis outside the city walls. Reality bent and twisted and warped. Sam stood near Cassie, and Pris, but nothing was recognizable or right.

The businessman struck first, cast his spear toward Hektor who moved out of the line of fire and returned his. It struck full center his opponent's shield and stayed, lost to him. The businessman threw down the shield and pulled the spear free while Hektor grabbed his sword.

Sun beat so hot Cassie wanted to pass out. The land around them shimmered into a white haze. They were enclosed in the battle and behind them Fontana Park stood, abandoned desert of no use to anyone but a handful who would call it home. Cassie looked briefly at Sam—he stood tall and proud. Regal, almost. He was the one who had brought everyone together, had made them a community rather than an unconnected band of squatters. He was the one who had called the

battle, reached back in time to bring the warriors to defend the walled city. Cassie was the one who had seen it. For just that instant there were chariots and warriors still, leather armor and spears, the smell of dust raised in an ancient city.

And then there as a businessman in a logo'd cap and a biker in leathers and it shouldn't have happened the way it did but the economic authority director lunged suddenly as if he'd been sword fighting all his life and Hektor caught the blow mid-torso, bright blade sliding through as if there were nothing to stop it. The rust-blooded tip tore out through his back and Hektor was falling before the other could retrieve the sword, falling backward through time and space to lie still, eyes staring upward at the sky above him and seeing what world?

Everything went still then, quiet and dead, and the businessman stood over the biker, unarmed and undone. He stared, mouth open, chest heaving exertion, and said nothing but pointed, his eyes full of fear and fury.

Cassie expected the deputies to come forward then, or the other two men, or all of them, but they didn't. They all shared the same sick, dazed expression, and there was only one man, backing away, trembling now, and it almost seemed nothing more needed to be said.

But that wasn't Sam's way. Cassie thought he looked about ready to start quoting again, and stepped forward before he did.

"It's a big desert," she said. "There are lots of nice niches and gullies and valleys for you to destroy, most of them closer to the road. Easier access. Much better locations. No one has died there." She stood watching him try and take it all in, Cassie, Sam, the fallen biker.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, of course." And started backing up again. She stood watching, no longer a bystander but involved and a part of something, and knew it was time to go, knew she'd be gone in the morning. Knew Sam knew it too. He always knew when she was coming home. He always knew when she was going.

The bikers gathered their brother. The invaders gathered their warrior. They left the battle plain.

• • •

Cassie didn't sleep well that night. Had dreams half-waking where

she saw the economic authority guy hand over papers to Sam. She couldn't tell what they were but she saw Sam smile when he read them and that was good enough for her. She saw Sam and Pris come together, as she always knew they would, and in a dream near morning she saw the rabbit-faced guy heading out of the valley altogether, a darkness over him that spoke ill for his Neiman Marcus dreams. And most of all she saw the road laid out before her, and saw herself following it and when she woke in the morning Sam had left late-blooming wildflowers on her bike and a piece of paper folded up and tucked against the seat so it wouldn't blow away.

Cassie shouldered her pack. Her teeth itched. Her skin felt tight. It was more than time to go. She pocketed the piece of paper and swung a leg over her bike. The other four were waiting for her at the highway. There were no signals exchanged, no gestures made. They were at the highway when she got there and, when she stopped and canted onto one leg and waited, they exploded their bikes into life, early morning sun on chrome and black leather and smoked visors. One by one they pulled out and she took up position in the V, riding easily while the road unfolded toward her with the promise of every morning.

Late that night she sat alone by the campfire on the side of the road. The others had bedded down and overhead the sky was alive with stars and mystery. She watched silently for a while, then slid the note from Sam from her pocket and read it by the embers of the fire.

"So long as all the increased wealth which modern progress brings goes but to build up great fortune, to increase luxury and make sharper the contrast between the House of Have and the House of Want, progress is not real and cannot be permanent. Henry George, *Progress and Poverty*, Introductory, The Problem."

"God Money, let's go dancing on the backs of the bruised," Cassie said out loud to the empty stars. "*Head Like a Hole*. Nine Inch Nails." And then she laughed. There would be other battles for Fontana Park, other developers, other threats from progress. She'd see Sam again and they'd weather them together or talk about them over tea. But for now, the road beckoned. •

But while that's thrilling, I don't think of him as a murderer, at least not a practiced one.

Why the Poets Were Banned from the City

Jerome Stueart

He drives with his foot hard on the gas all the way to our café. I've imagined him a hundred times as he was before we met him, before he broke down in front of us, or pulled the gun, or shot it, because I want to understand who he was before he left us, and maybe what he discovered with us, if anything at all. So I have him driving his car out of the Republic, passing the checkpoints, having the gun hidden well enough to pass a scan. I don't know how he did that. I imagine he has to fake it really well, his emotional state, and act like a tourist, say that no, he's not planning a long stay. Yes, it's just for research for an ad campaign. No, he doesn't know anyone here. Just coffee, conversation, a pleasant time. Has he brought the necessary emotional inhibitors? He shows them a handful of blue pills. He's ready, he says. They let him through. Probably the info hasn't hit his profile on their scanners yet. It's too fresh.

He's coming away from the suicide of his only daughter, Samantha. Sam. He calls her Sam when he talks to us. So I need to call her Sam now. She was good at illustration and ad design, the top in her fifth grade class. She played a tin whistle in her school orchestra. In

the picture that he shows us, she has long dark hair and she is smiling, but he doesn't remember the smiles so much over the last few weeks.

When the man comes into our café, it's sunny outside and the blue blinds are drawn and it gives the place an underwater feel that I've always liked. The espresso machine drowns out his first words, but everyone here can tell the man is upset, and every poet deep down believes, as if communally psychic, that his story would be thrilling and poignant, if a bit over-dramatically narrated. We knew that even then. Out of breath, angry, the man stands with the door of the café half open, glancing around him. He's up to his neck in a dark blue business suit, looped by a red tie.

At first I thought he was emotionally unstable. I wanted to see his questions to the poets, his accusations, as the result of a man pushed to the edge of rational behavior, not someone who thought about this a lot, a crank, a policrat. He was someone who had been through a rough morning. Maybe he was the one who found her drowned in the bathtub. Maybe he knocked on the door several times because he needed in. It was morning and suicides usually happen at night, so he had no reason to believe that anything was different. Except that she didn't answer, and this part I'm assuming, though Charlie has written that he killed her, but I don't think that's the case. At least, that wasn't in my first draft. Later, when I'd read his version, I thought that he presented the whole story as the story of a man who was on the edge for other reasons—his job, his wife, something missing in his life. And he accidentally drowns his daughter.

But, while that's thrilling, I don't think of him as a murderer, at least not a practiced one. So I graded Charlie's story pretty low when Workshop Time came. Mainly because I hadn't really come to terms with who the character was—I mean the man—but what his character was like. We all agreed on *distraught*. We all agreed that he was dangerous, walking into a café like that, pulling out a black snub-nosed revolver.

But we don't agree on backstory, motive or anything else. And I wasn't satisfied with even my version of the story, so I went back to him driving to the café. He picks out our café even though we are not the first café he will pass. He passes Haloed Grounds first, and then a rapper bar on the corner, and then us, Lethe Bank. He makes a clear choice. Does the number of cars make a difference? Do the names make a difference? While most of us have written ad copy for

the city, we don't think much about advertising here. Mostly we cater to regulars, so why would we think too much about name recognition or what those names might mean to Republicans coming out to see us? We don't. We concentrate on our games, our stories and poems and essays we write for each other and ourselves, the secret workshops we hold inside the city, memorization groups we've started. We have a lot on our mind.

And he does too that day, but I didn't know what it had to do with us.

This is the kind of thing they said we were responsible for, which is why no one comes when I press the secret buttons under the bar. Which is why the Republic Police do not show up in time, which is why we are always told that we have to handle it ourselves. This is the way it goes when imaginative literature, poetry, anything with a scrap of decency is banned from inside the city. We cause emotions without product directive, emotions without prescription. People can read our writing and feel something and they don't know what to do with that emotion. In the city, all those pretty pieces of writing you see—most of them done by us when we absolutely have to have money—have a directive: buy this toothcream, explore this underground chasm, invest in this high-rolling casino. So if we make you feel sad or happy, you can find resolution in a purchase. But literature on the other hand doesn't let you off the hook that easily and that's why they had a time when we were blamed for a lot of murders and mayhem that went on. Music caused *this*; fiction caused *that*. This man saw this movie and committed this crime. People thought about things the government didn't want people thinking about. Now, the ad campaigns are so personalized to cater to your every taste that they're really specific in their manipulation—which, apparently, is our skill. So, while we can't write what we want, we write what will sell.

The man accuses a table full of poets and writers of killing his daughter, Sam. To prove it, he produces a scrap of paper taken from her hand that had the following phrase: *Because I could not stop for death, he kindly stopped for me.* And he asks who wrote it, and we could recite the whole thing by heart, but Starla tells him it is Emily Dickinson.

I can see him busting down the door of the bathroom when he doesn't get an answer from his knock. The wood would splinter at the lock, so it would be sharp to fall against when he finally does go

through. I see her like a Waterhouse painting of Ophelia under water, only fully dressed in her school colors, in a black and tan uniform, maybe, or blue and tan, with her white face under the water and her black hair rising like a silk cushion around her head. She must have had a lot of courage and strength not to come back up to the surface of a bathtub. It would take only a nod, you know, bob your head back up out of the water. She had to hold herself under. And I don't think of her eyes as open when I imagine the scene, not like Scott does. She's not horrific, or startling. She's quiet and buried, like Snow White under glass.

He wants to see Emily Dickinson. And I know the group shouldn't have laughed, but it's the irony of everything that comes back and kicks you in the ass. Would he have been this angry if he knew that Dickinson was dead, that she wasn't a living villain, out to hurt his daughter, or other young girls in the Republic? Would he have sought her out in the Outskirts, among us, if he remembered that, oh, she died in 1886? Yes, she won't be out there. And this galls us, that the poetry that is the most moving, that causes the strongest emotions, isn't even ours. And the other poets have no idea that the man is looking to kill someone, only that their poetry is hardly as effective, and that this man is ignorant of literature. The kind of irony we chat about daily in the café.. Some of us slip real poetic lines into advertisements all the time. For wine—Keats, "Oh for a draught of vintage!" and then they show the bottle and the man dying of thirst. Eliot for selling pickups to men: "And there will be a time to wonder, Do I dare? And, Do I dare?" Blake for oven mitts: "What hand dare seize the fire?" We sneak it in where we can. But these are all in-jokes for us mostly because it doesn't matter.

And now, after a long time, maybe years, of no "literature-connected incident"—this man comes in, doing exactly what people supposedly did when reading literature, though this rarely happens to us and we are exposed to the deadly emotion producing stuff all the time. The media call us immune—we see through fiction and poetry and we can handle the emotions because we bend them, and are, therefore, ourselves unstable. So there are thousands of us who have the power to manipulate people, we've drunk enough of the poison to be immune, and we have to pay for any unstable words of Dickinson that cause a young girl to drown herself. Powerful and responsible, but

exiled and needed at the same time. For the people of the Republic, then, literature moved them, really moved them, and that's like the biggest potential audience for a bestseller, only there aren't any, just full length action-oriented infomercials and novel-length ads, commercials with characters you love to watch buy the boat or graduate from the school with full scholarships that are available at the address on the screen. But this man, this Dylan Hailey, was affected by a death. Not a poem. The girl was affected by her own life going in some bizarre way. This explanation is unacceptable to Mr. Hailey. Because when you see your daughter underwater in that blue way and her hand holds something, then she is telling you that the piece of paper is the key. And you will go anywhere to find the answer to that key and you will not believe anyone is innocent who is connected to that key. And you will point your gun at a mystery writer, an environmental essayist and two poets looking for the answer to that key, and maybe the key to Emily Dickinson's apartment.

I think Starla's chapbook, *The Bend of Light Through Water*, an excellent collection of poems she wrote following Mr. Hailey's visit, returns to the central problem that I've been trying to understand. Light is distorted in water—not only the light that enters it, as if seen from below, but also light as seen from above. When he looked down at her face through the water, he didn't see truth. I don't think Hailey saw the truth, even at the end. I think he came close. But he had no references, no way of understanding context. Is context what I want to say? It's close. Maybe narrative is better. Or practice, as Barry said in his essay. Hailey did not have practice with contextualizing his experience.

He sits at the table, still holding the gun, and he asks for a glass of water and I bring it to him, setting it down as he leans back to let me move in front of him. I think about being a hero—I write adventure fiction and ads for *Boy's Life*—but it's one thing to think about being the hero and another to actually be one. Those punches are easy to write, "he fit a right cross under his chin," but have you tried one? So I don't. I bring him his water—I offer to fix him a coffee, and what am I thinking? He doesn't need the caffeine. He asks me to sit, so there are six of us at the table; Joan, the mystery writer who eventually filled in some of the blanks, stays at the table in the back, moving to the blue couch under Van Gogh's *Starry Night* only when he asks her to.

Joan interrogates him. She's good at that, having written a slew of

mystery novels and some good mystery story lines for pharmaceutical companies. "Tell us about your daughter," she says. He hesitates, asks for Emily.

Joan takes the biggest risk. "She's dead."

And he looks at her, moves the gun in her direction.

"All the people she loved died. She died of grief." She says this in a matter of fact way, so that he will know the truth, and not want to hurt anyone. In the way that Charlie tells this moment, he grossly overplays the man's grief. But, even if it's badly written, the man does break down. Big sobs. He covers his mouth, as if he is trying to hold them back, but they keep bursting through his fingers, out of his eyes. He still holds the gun, but it wavers at all of us in a casual way, an afterthought of malice, but still dangerous. Charlie makes this the reason he fired the gun in the end. He says the turning point was right here, when he made the connection between himself and Emily Dickinson—and I think it's important—but I see the connection as also being between his daughter, Sam, and Emily. Because what the others don't write down, not even Barry, was what Joan said after that. She says, "Emily wrote about dying a lot when she was trying to understand the death of her friends." That's what I think has to be the moment when we started helping him contextualize and grieve—and maybe I'm oversimplifying it—but I'm trying to find where the narrative line is inside his head. What leads to what leads to the gun going off?

I think if Emily had been alive, she would have died that day. He needs to do some action—just like he's been taught by all those commercials. He has an emotion. He has to take some action. And this is what makes it difficult for everyone at that table, I think. Everyone knows that he is going to have to do something—at least fire the gun. That's one of the first rules of mystery writing: if you have a gun in a story, it must go off.

Instead of getting angry with Joan—she's kind of a mother figure here, and older than Mr. Hailey—he starts talking about Sam, telling us what she was like as a baby, how she had to be held all the time, and he had to get permission to wear her in a pouch to work. She secured him a toy account with China. Barry tells him that she was that image of what they were looking for in a caring, paternal ad campaign. He said that the Chinese even suggested that they allow this child to grow up through their commercials. They loved Sam. Her Chinese name—

they gave her one that day—meant *fruit* because she looked like a fruit attached to Mr. Hailey. When Charlie writes this scene, he has Mr. Hailey say that he always looked at the campaign as the fruit of his fatherhood. But this is essentially wrong. It's because, I think, he couldn't make those metaphorical leaps that he lost it.

Starla tries to ask about the weeks leading up to this morning, tries to get him to think of what his daughter was doing, what she was thinking. There was no diary that he knew of. But she had had a best friend and a relationship with her. She had come home crying, shut herself in her room, but that was more than a week ago, and she had been pleasant the last few days, not happy, but friendly and calm. Starla tells him that this is sometimes what people who are planning suicide do—they become resolved, happy, because they've figured out what they will do. How they will leave the pain. And I almost think that he could have walked out of the café a calmer, happier person himself—and maybe he did in the car—but he remembers the poetry, and even if Emily was going through a hard time, why did she take his daughter with her?

He stands up and points the gun at Starla—not Joan—but Starla, the woman I see nearly every day. She teaches a private workshop in a basement apartment for three women. Their work is getting popular out here and we print it like mad because we're happy when any fiction or poetry or any real writing gets out of the city. She has red hair, curly, down to her shoulders, and we have been seeing each other for a few years. So like Sam meant something to Dylan Hailey, Starla meant something to me. And I knew that the gun would have to go off sometime. This is where I played hero and maybe I changed things.

I am faster than I think with the coffee mug, but I am sloppy and Starla could have been killed. It hits him in the head. The gun does not go off, but the man falls over in his chair. I get down on top of him and, originally, I was just going to hold him down so he won't hurt anyone. He looks at me so pitifully, as if he wants to be punched, to be shot, and won't I do it for him? Charlie and Barry both have me wrestling on the floor with him, and I think they wrote that because they were doing an homage to my adventure fiction, but I really hate that part in their narrative of the events. They claim I punched him. And I don't remember. I do remember thinking, *I don't want this power you think we have. This power to hurt you with emotions.* So I thought I didn't

touch him. I didn't hurt him. But maybe I did. I took away some dignity, some resolution he might have been coming to that was different. He wrenches his arm from under mine and sticks the gun in my stomach and everything stops in the room. I can hear the acoustic radio overhead and the toilet in the bathroom that never fully stops running water. Just a tank filling up and up. I swear I never punched him. But I almost did. But after he got the gun in my stomach we both stand up and he leads me to the door and we walk out of the shop into the daylight and he pushes me into his car and tells me to drive.

And this is the part that only I can tell. Other writers have speculated on just what happened, what was said, where things went. I wish he had taken Barry or even Charlie, or Joan (though I'm not wishing danger on these people) because they could have better explained to him what they were thinking. I knew what effect I wanted to have on him. I wanted to say things to get him to drop the gun. And I raced through all the ways a writer has to make people feel things—it's what we are good at, right? Then why did I start talking about how he had to contextualize things? I try to tell him how to tell a story to himself. I don't know what else to do. The car races down the street as I drive, and he keeps telling me, Faster. I say that stories can heal you too. They don't just have an effect on making you do something, but when something bad happens to you, you can write it down and find some meaning. But he says there is no meaning in suicide. There is no Emily and so he doesn't know who to blame and he can't blame Sam. She was just a child. Maybe, I say, if you write something from Sam's point of view...? I don't know what I'm saying. I am not so much concerned for myself. I see that he is in terrible danger. We aren't going towards the city, but away from the Outskirts, toward the desert where there aren't any provisions or roads, and there are dunes and canyons.

"My daughter is dead and I can't figure out why she died," he starts and I encourage him to continue, nodding, and yessing. "She was so beautiful," he said. "And she would have been a great person—she wanted to be someone who designed space ships—did I tell you that? She drew pictures of spaceships, beautiful ones designed after flowers. She said that would be prettier in the sky than the metal ones. If maybe she could see a flower floating down to the ground, she wouldn't be afraid of aliens, or of space travel. Isn't that amazing? Isn't it? If a flower-shaped ship blew up in the air, the petals would be okay,

because they would still be beautiful.” I turn to him, and his eyes are tearing up again. “That’s my daughter. My Sam said that. She wanted to make flowers in the sky.”

He twists his wrist suddenly and puts the gun in his mouth and pulls the trigger while I drove over 60 miles per hour, yelling and yelling and yelling. No. The car spins out because I’m scared, the blast is so loud, much louder than you expect, the glass behind his head shatters and the car careens into a ditch because I look away from the road, away from the shot.

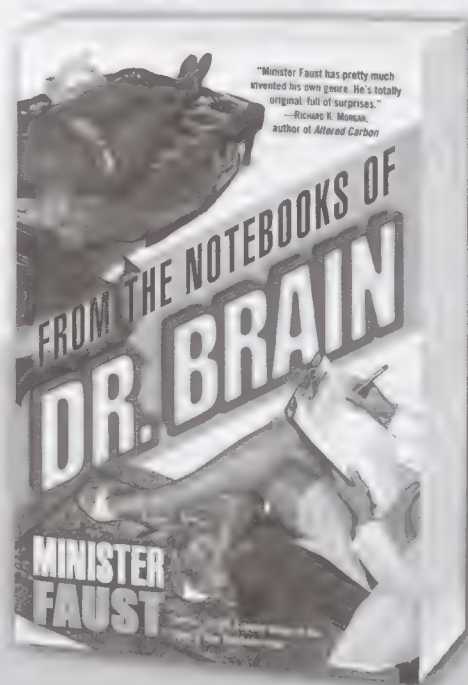
The others have already jumped in their cars and followed and I don’t remember them pulling me out of the car, but I remember standing and holding Starla, getting blood everywhere, some of it mine.

Later, when Barry writes dialogue into that scene, I explode during the Workshop Time. I mean, he’s got the man still alive, barely speaking, hanging out of the car, and I know he’s writing it that way to bring some sort of closure. But the man—he had no head. Part of it was on me. I was there. And how can they take that moment and try to work it differently. And later, I’ll repent profusely, give him free coffees which he turns down, but at the moment I can see why we were banned from the city. We’re heartless, soulless.

“This was a man’s life,” I tell them and throw the manuscript across the table, “*not* a good story.” The papers hit Barry, and I am half standing and I know what all of us are thinking at that moment, and it hits me like an oncoming train. I’m the man now. Like I caught what he caught from his daughter. I’m sitting at the same table and I am angry because they don’t understand my pain and I’m threatening, and Starla has risen just like me and it reminds me of how Hailey pointed the gun at her first and I wonder who will beat me up and hold me down and stop me from doing something stupid. But no one has to, because I can see myself and Hailey and I know what I have to do. Starla says, “You write about it, hon. Go back and write it out, figure it out.” And I knock over a chair, and go back to the back room and I look in the mirror and I think I see some blood that didn’t come out of the shirt I’m wearing or the apron, or my face. But I’m smarter than Lady Macbeth. I know that washing will never get it out. Instead, I take a clean white sheet of paper and I dirty it with my story, and Hailey dies again, so I can live. •


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about our contributors

Jennifer Rachel Baumer lives and writes in Reno, Nevada. She firmly believes the American West has enough room for strange things to happen and is waiting impatiently for them to start. In the meantime, she writes.

Paul Hosek lives in Kitchener with his wife Natalia and their son Isaac. When he is not writing fiction, Paul works as a Physician in the field of Intensive Care Medicine and sometimes dabbles in ER and Trauma. He hopes you enjoyed his story.

Adam La Rusic is, in order of profitability, an engineer, musician, writer and poet. He lives in beautiful North Vancouver, British Columbia.

Claire Litton has been writing since she was three years old and made her first book by stapling construction paper together. She is a professional belly dancer and life drawing model, and enjoys watching movies that are so bad, they're good. She loves all things science fiction, and thinks Joss Whedon is god.

D.T. Mitenko is a flatlander from Winnipeg, and now loosely operates out of the West Coast. When he's not writing Mitenko does things like tech work for schizophrenia research or he's off volunteering overseas. His last permanent address was in Nepal and before that, the Maldives. His short story *The Truth About Bats* will be published in an upcoming issue of *Bewildering Stories*. His publishing history also includes articles in Victoria's *Monday Magazine*, *On Spec* and online with *luluzine*.

Robert Pasternak lives in Winnipeg and has worked in his Nakfactorium studio since 1990. His paintings have graced the covers of previous issues of *On Spec* magazine as well as *Amazing Stories*. Since November '06, after 27 years of painting Robert has traded in his paint brushes for celluloid and is currently making films—or moving paintings as he likes to call them—and has just finished packaging a collection of ten of these experimental/metaphysical shorts in a DVD called *Experiments with Humans*. He is also making candy for the sake of

designing packaging and has also developed a set of six Cosmic Creatures for no really good reason. Write nak@mts.net for a catalogue of all his available prints, posters and novelties, or visit www.nakvision.com to see more of his paintings.

Jerome Stueart is a landed immigrant, moving from Texas to Whitehorse, Yukon Territory in late summer. His work most recently appeared in *Tesseract Nine*, and has been a runner up for the Fountain Award. He currently lives in Edmonson, TX, teaching at Texas Tech University. In August, he will load up his truck and drive 3000 miles to his new country.

Allan Weiss lives in Toronto and is Associate Professor of English and Humanities at York University. He is Chair of the Academic Conference on Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy. His SF stories have appeared in three of the *Tesseracts* anthologies, *Prairie Fire*, and elsewhere, and his mainstream collection, *Living Room*, was published in 2001. *Making Light* is the second story featuring Eliezer ben-Avraham; the first story, *The Missing Word*, appeared in the Summer 2001 issue of *On Spec*.

Robert Weston's fiction has appeared in literary journals on both sides of the Atlantic. He has been nominated for the Journey Prize in Canada and the Fountain Award in the United States. Forthcoming stories will soon appear in the *New Orleans Review* and *Postscripts*.

in upcoming issues... In 2006 we announced *On Spec's* "In the Shadow of Leviathan" short fiction competition. Featured in the Summer issue will be the winning entry *The Laws of Motion* by Catherine MacLeod, and *Manna* by Leslie Brown (Honourable Mention). Congratulations to both authors. Also look for great new fiction and poetry by Claire Litton, Jack Skillingstead, Angela Slatter, and many more.

Errata: Last issue Steve Mohn's essay "Cold War Kid" was listed as fiction—rest assured it's not (our apologies, Steve)!

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